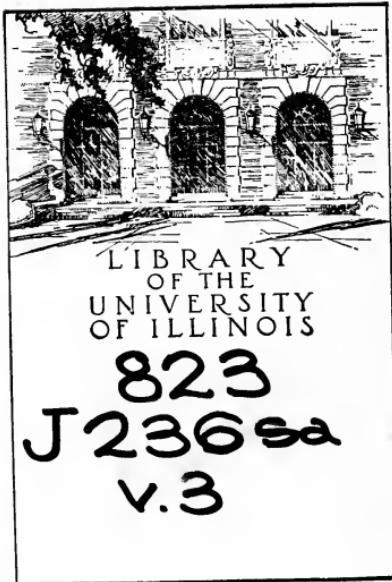
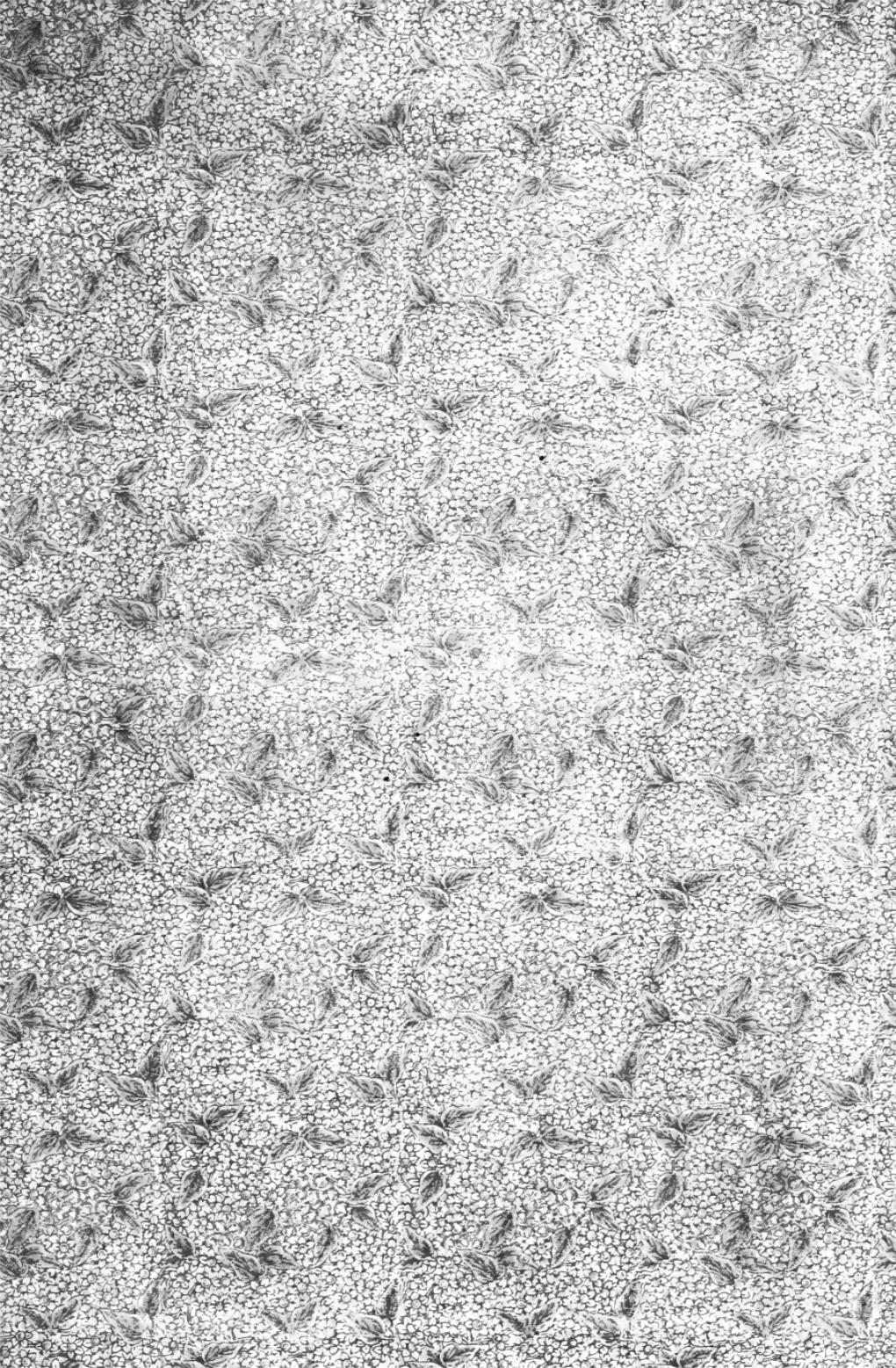


ST. CUTHBERT'S TOWER

FLORENCE WARDEN

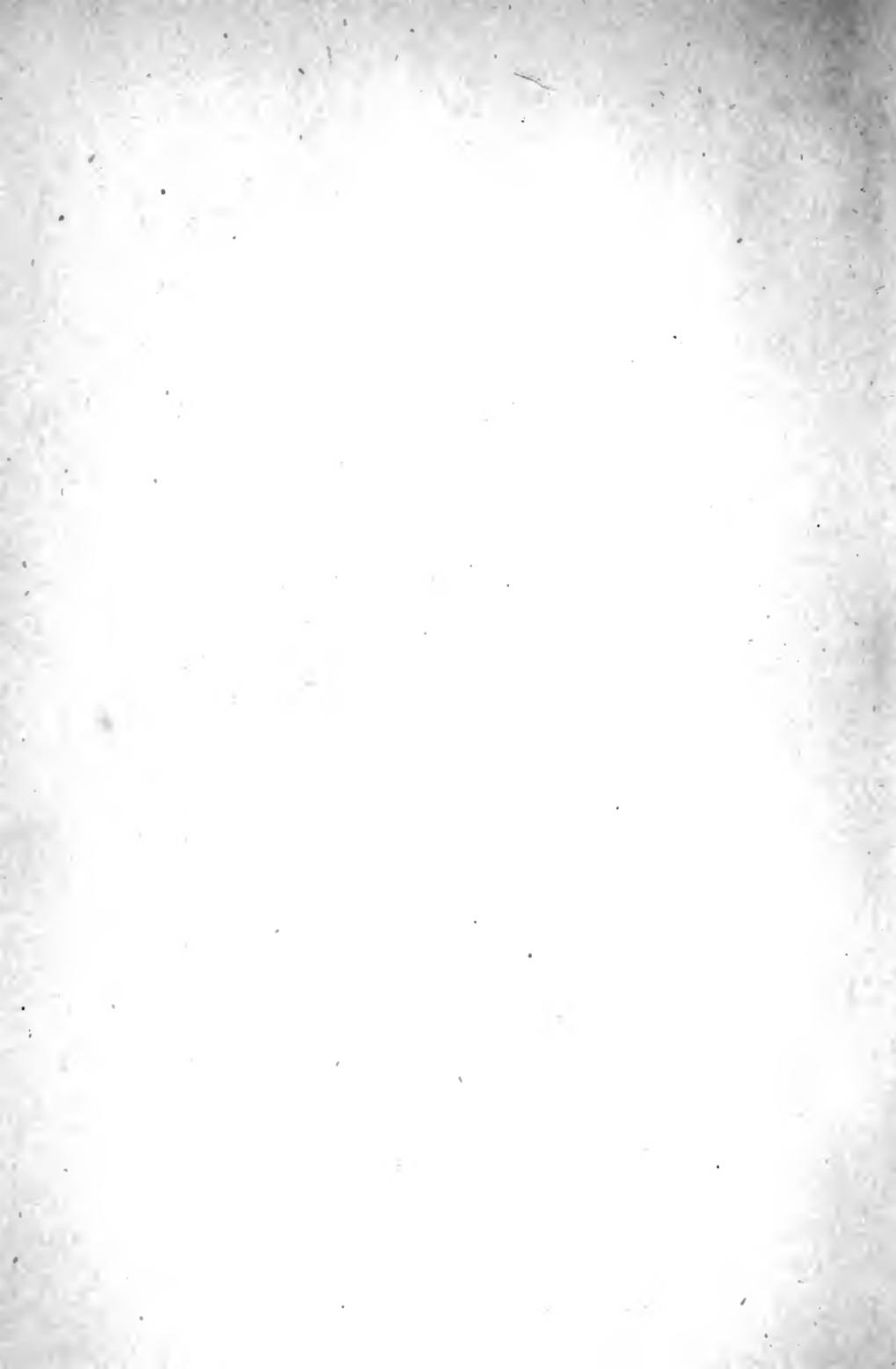






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ST. CUTHBERT'S TOWER.



ST. CUTHBERT'S TOWER.

BY

FLORENCE WARDEN,

AUTHOR OF "THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH," ETC.

VOL. III.

CASSELL & COMPANY, LIMITED:

LONDON, PARIS, NEW YORK & MELBOURNE.

1889.

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ST. CUTHBERT'S TOWER.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BLOODHOUNDS IN TRAINING.

THE Reverend Meredith Brander had not been Vicar of Rishton and compulsory student of the wiles of frail humanity for fourteen years for nothing. When from his study window he saw Ned Mitchell—after many yawns, several sleepy stretchings out of his arms, and an occasional nod of the head—retire from his back door and shut himself in, it seemed to the vicar by no means certain that his neighbour had gone to bed. So he withdrew a little way into the shelter of his window curtains, and remained on the watch, beguiling the time by composing a very pretty opening for next Sunday morning's sermon, wherein the rising moon, as it showed more and more of his laurels, was used to typify

the grace of repentance illuminating the dark places of the heart.

And the result justified Mr. Brander's doubts. Ned Mitchell did, it is true, go to bed, but he speedily got up again, impelled to this freak partly by the pain in his injured leg and partly by his unsatisfied curiosity concerning the accomplishments of his dogs. The vicar smiled as, after an hour and a half's watching, he saw Ned's candle glimmering weakly through the blinds ; first on the upper floor of the cottage, and then on the lower. Presently Ned himself re-appeared at the back door, which he set wide open, before proceeding to draw on his hands a pair of stout leather gloves. Then he retreated into the cottage again, and gave the vicar time to open his window a little way very softly. As he did so, sounds of yelping and scuffling reached his ears from the cottage; and a few moments later the hounds rushed out into the garden.

The month was May, and in this cold north country the trees both in the vicar's garden and

in that of his neighbour were as yet only thinly covered with leaves ; so that there was little to hide the movements of the animals, which, after a preliminary scamper round the house and an attempt to get through the bars of the gate, began to sneak about close to the walls and under the shrubs, sniffing, prowling, scratching, like uncanny creatures half seen in the moonlight, making the branches of the evergreens sway and rustle, and uttering from time to time a yelping, whining sound, as they grubbed and searched restlessly for food. The vicar pulled aside his curtain and watched with great interest. The hounds were getting—whether by accident or led by scent he could not yet tell—nearer and nearer to the shrub under which Ned Mitchell had buried the untempting bones. Ned himself, from the upper floor of the cottage, was intently watching them. Hither and thither the brutes roamed, in apparently random search for something to appease their hunger. With nose pointed always to the earth they crept slowly along, or bounded a few paces, sometimes raising

the night echoes by a deep howl, more often uttering the low, wolfish sounds of half-starved savage creatures. But aimless as their wanderings seemed to be, often as they deviated from a straight course to it, they did both come, slowly but surely, nearer to the auricula. The vicar rose from his chair; Ned Mitchell hung his whole body out of his little window. As the animals drew closer to the place where the bones were hidden, they seemed to the careful eyes of the watcher to grow more excited, to yelp and whine more savagely, to sniff the cold earth with keener nostrils. At last the muzzle of one of the hounds touched the prickly leaves of one of the lowest branches of the auricula. He drew back with a snort of pain. A minute later, however, drawn by his irresistible instinct, he returned, and, making a furious attempt to pass under the low branches, retreated again, whining and savage from the effect of the pricks he had received. The third time both dogs drew near together, and this time—regardless of the scratches inflicted by the thorny boughs on their

backs—they pushed their way under the auricula, and began to grub and to scratch up the earth with might and main.

In an incredibly short space of time, considering the depth of earth with which Ned had covered them, the bloodhounds had dug up the buried bones and were crunching them ravenously with their powerful jaws. Ned, uttering a short laugh of triumph, raised his head and caught sight of the vicar, who now, regardless of concealment, was pressing close to the window panes of his study a face which looked of a greenish pallor in the moonlight. Ned watched him with an intent, glaring gaze for a few seconds ; then, shutting his little window rapidly and noiselessly, he slipped out of the cottage by the front door, and, making his way round to the back stealthily under cover of the evergreens, crept along in the shadow under the dividing wall until he stood, unseen by the vicar, almost under the latter's window. After the lapse of a few moments his curiosity was rewarded.

"Poor Vernon! My poor brother!" murmured the vicar with a heavy sigh.

Then Ned, hugging himself and indulging in a knowing smile of satisfaction, heard the study window close.

He crept back into his little house by the way he had come, narrowly escaping the attentions of his hounds, which having quickly finished the scanty meal the dry bones afforded them, seemed inclined to try, as more nourishing, the person of their master. He went indoors, armed himself with a plate of raw meat in one hand and a short whip in the other, and calling them into the house succeeded in shutting them up once more in the room they had previously occupied.

"Good dogs! good dogs!" he said, approvingly, as he stood at the crack of the door and watched them snarling over their food. "That's nothing to the meal you shall have when you've hunted out the next lot of old bones I shall set you grubbing for."

And with another grim chuckle as he closed

the back door and gave a glance at the now deserted study window of the Vicarage, Ned Mitchell retired for the night with a light heart and a good conscience.

Next morning Ned was early on the watch, in spite of the fact that the wound in his leg gave him a good deal of pain. He saw the vicar go out a couple of hours earlier than usual; and instead of walking, as was his custom in the morning, he was on his cob. Ned nodded to him as he went by, and timed his absence by a ponderous gold watch which was with him night and day.

“An hour and twenty minutes,” he said to himself, as Mr. Brander returned at an ambling clerical pace, and, meeting the nurse with his little son descending the hill for their morning walk, gave the boy a ride in front of him as far as the stables. “Yes, parson; just long enough to ride to St. Cuthbert’s, catch your brother before he started on his parish work, have a quarter of an hour’s chat—about the weather, let us say—and be back in time for your own morning walk.”

Perhaps Ned Mitchell's shrewd face betrayed his suspicions ; perhaps the wily vicar's knowledge of men was greater than any that books on divinity could impart : for, seeing the colonist leaning as usual over his garden gate, his shrewd eyes lazily blinking in the spring sunshine, Mr. Brander nodded, wished him good-morning, and added, cheerfully—

“ On the watch, eh ? ”

“ Perhaps, vicar,” answered Ned, touching his hat, with a knowing twinkle in his eye.

“ How are the pets this morning, after their night's work ? ”

“ Night's work ? ” echoed Ned, who had entertained the mean suspicion that the vicar would not own to his nocturnal observations.

“ Yes. I did a little bit of spying too, last night,” answered Mr. Brander, who seemed to take a frank and boyish delight in an open and declared warfare with his neighbour. “ How's the leg this morning ? ”

Ned, who chose to think that the vicar might have prevented the injury to his limb

if it had so pleased him, answered with a tone which was in marked contrast to the good humour of the other.

"It'll do," he said, shortly. "How's your brother this morning?"

Again Mr. Brander seemed to take a buoyant pleasure in his antagonist's cuteness.

"My brother is very well," he said, smiling. "And I'm sure, whatever you may think, that he would be quite pleased to hear of your kind inquiries."

"Well, we shall see about that," said Ned. "Now, come, parson," he went on, persuasively, "you might just as well confess what I know—that you rode over to St. Cuthbert's this morning to put him on his guard against my tricks."

"And may not one with good reason put an innocent man on his guard against an avowed enemy?"

"I am not your brother's enemy, Mr. Brander. I am the enemy of the man who

murdered my sister. It is you who are saying that they are one and the same."

"No, no, no!" broke out the vicar, with vehemence unusual to him. "The fact is, you have come here with what you consider a strong case against the poor fellow, and everything you hear goes to pad up that case. If I believed in my brother's guilt, do you suppose I should leave my little daughter in his care, as I have done for the last week, and intend to do for another fortnight?"

"Why not, parson?" said Ned, very quietly. "Neither you nor I are simple enough to think the worse of a man because he happens to have made a little slip by the way. The man who murdered my sister didn't say to himself, 'I will change my whole course of life and become a murderer,' as if it were a profession. No, he is going about the world at this moment just like you or me, doing his daily duty as well as he can, and perhaps feeling sorry enough for that little slip to better his life in atonement for it."

"Indeed, indeed he is," broke in the vicar, earnestly. "If you could see how my brother works; how he tries by every means——"

"Hadn't we better leave your brother's name out of the discussion?" asked Ned, with a touch of dry insolence. "You are not anxious to fix the noose round his neck yourself, I suppose."

The poor vicar looked beyond measure crest-fallen and disconcerted. After all his assertions of his brother's innocence, to have betrayed himself like that! He stammered and tried to explain away his unfortunate admission; but not succeeding very well, he made haste to cut short the conversation and retreat into the house with his little son.

Ned Mitchell was not left long without an object to interest him. He remained sunning himself at his garden gate for some minutes after Mr. Brander's disappearance, and then retired into his cottage, from one of the tree-shaded windows of which he soon saw a person approaching, at sight of whom his rugged

features seemed to tighten, the only sign they ever gave of unusual excitement. It was Vernon Brander. From the curious glances which the clergyman cast in the direction of the room in which the bloodhounds, now asleep after a good meal, were still confined, it was clear he had been fully informed concerning them. He stopped before the garden fence, peering among the evergreens with evident interest. But as Ned appeared at the door, with the intention of a little talk with him, he hurried on towards the Vicarage without another glance at the cottage. Ned looked after him with a curling lip.

“I suppose some people would admire that fellow, with his lanky face and his good deeds. But I never did have any fancy for your martyrs, especially when their private life won’t bear looking into.”

And after watching the clergyman until he had turned into the private road, Ned directed his attention to two visitors, who, attracted by certain rumours about the occupant of the

cottage, and the menagerie he had set up there, had joined their forces on the way to pay Mr. Mitchell a morning call.

These visitors were Mr. Denison and Fred Williams. Fred had by no means got the better of his violent admiration for Olivia Denison. But having found her persistently "out," when he called at the farm, and persistently curt when he met her out of doors, he had consoled himself for her frigidity by taking a trip to New York, whence he had now not long returned. To signalise his recent achievements in the way of travel, he wore a wide-brimmed hat and a sea-sick complexion, and carried a revolver in a leather belt. This was his first meeting with any of the Hall Farm people since his return, so that, on coming face to face with Mr. Denison, who was passing through the farmyard gate, he overwhelmed him by an outburst of effusive cordiality which astonished that gentleman beyond measure, but raised his spirits, and soothed him with the feeling that here was a friend.

Mr. Denison was one of those simple-natured men who are only too ready to find a friend in any one who addresses to them a kindly word. Things had been going badly with him. Having started farming with all the skin-deep energy of the enthusiastic amateur, he had long ere this discovered the perversity of the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms: the determination with which sheep die of the rot, pigs take the measles, beans and peas refuse to come up at the proper time, and crops fail on the slightest provocation, or on none. A suspicion had begun to take root even in his ingenuous mind that there was more in farming than one would have thought while going over a farm; and a stronger suspicion still that, if things did not soon "take a turn," his new profession, instead of making his fortune, would land him in the Bankruptcy Court. He could not fail, moreover, to be alive to the sturdy animosity of his rival, John Oldshaw, and to the ever-increasing pleasure which that amiable person showed on meeting him, as his own prospects of

finally getting the Hall Farm at an easy rent seemed to grow better.

Olivia, who understood her father's temperament too well to communicate to him the smallest fact which was likely to trouble him, had never uttered the name of Fred Williams in his presence, except to say, with much haughtiness, that he was a quite insufferable person. But Mr. Denison, who never disliked anybody, would have been quite ready to set her aversion down to groundless prejudice when Fred listened sympathetically to a rambling account of the last outbreak of the feud with Oldshaw.

"The fellow's such a cad, too," complained Mr. Denison, mildly. "Not that I should think the worse of him for not being a gentleman," he added. "His son is a nice lad, a very nice lad, and we get on together admirably. If he were only in one's own class there might be a Montague and Capulet end to the business, I fancy; for if he were a little better educated I should almost fancy he was in love with my daughter

Olivia. You may have seen Olivia?" he continued, naïvely, with a touch of paternal pride.

Yes, Mr. Fred Williams might have seen Olivia, but was wise enough not to own to more than this at present.

"Well, the use that young fellow has been to me—me, a man old enough to be his father—is something remarkable. In fact, I don't mind telling you" (Mr. Denison didn't mind telling anybody) "that if it hadn't been for his hints, I should never have been able to carry on the farm at all. Why, if I give him—on the strict Q. T. you know, for it mustn't come to his father's ears—a commission to buy me a few sheep, or a well-bred shorthorn, and his father sends him to market for the same purpose, he'll contrive to get me the best, Mr. Williams—me the best—I assure you."

"Indeed!" murmured Fred, with a deferential courtesy entirely new to him.

"Yes, I assure you it is so. Now I am not one of those old fools who fancy that a young

man will do such a thing out of friendship for a man of his father's generation. I see there is something behind it," continued Mr. Denison, astutely. "And I confess," he went on, growing more confidential as his small friend, while listening more sympathetically than ever, linked his arm within that of the farmer, "that I almost wish my daughter hadn't been 'brought up a lady,' as the saying is, when I see what a very good thing young Oldshaw and I could have made of it together—he with his knowledge of practical farming, and I with my—with my knowledge, my—er—my knowledge of the world, in fact."

"A very good idea, sir—a very good idea," assented Fred, enthusiastically. "At the same time, you might find a son-in-law who could help you without looking so far beneath you. I say so far," he went on, "because there is a something about you that—er—makes you sort of different from other people, you know; a dignity or high breeding or something; and perhaps your daughter may have a touch of it. I say

perhaps, you know, because I scarcely know Miss Denison."

"Well," said Mr. Denison, swallowing the bait with all simplicity, "I suppose there is, as you say, a certain *cachet* about a man who has lived so much in town or near town as I have. And whatever is best about me my Olivia has certainly inherited. But whoever my child marries, it must be for her own good; not for mine."

Simple, selfish Mr. Denison thought there was something rather praiseworthy in this declaration. Fred listened shrewdly.

"It must be much worse to be badly off, or—or not to be exactly flourishing, when one has a family to care for and provide for," he suggested.

Mr. Denison seized his hand.

"My dear lad, that's just it," said he, most earnestly and in all sincerity. "A man on a farm by himself must be in heaven. On the same farm, with a family, he may be in—in quite another place."

"I see, I see," murmured Fred, pressing his arm against that of the older man. "Money market tight, and all that."

"Tight, I believe you!" assented Mr. Denison, bubbling over with his confidences, as weak men do when they have had to exercise an unwonted self-repression. "You would scarcely believe what the tightness amounts to sometimes. A young man in your position couldn't realise it."

"Oh, yes, I could, though. Nothing of that sort that you have ever borne is as bad as what my guvnor's gone through lots of times. It was before he was blessed with me, and of course he don't talk about it; but you may take my word it's true."

"Dear me?" said Mr. Denison, as if this was almost inconceivable. Though in truth the airs of patronage the elder Mr. Williams liked to assume had often caused him to jibe gently in the bosom of his family at the waste of pounds by men who were better used to pence.

"But it seems worse for you, you know—

don't seem natural somehow. Seems as if it were the right and proper thing for you to have lots of money. Makes me uncomfortable to hear you haven't, and—and all that sort of thing, you know."

He gabbled out this broken speech with an air of modest confusion which touched Mr. Denison, whose finances were at a distressingly low ebb. He pressed the young fellow's arm in silence—rather awkwardly, but with much feeling. Fred went on, quickly—

"Now don't be offended; you mustn't be offended. I'm not of enough account in the world for a man like you to be offended with me. But if you wouldn't mind—you needn't think anything of it—if you should be tight, I mean strait, anything like hard up, in fact, I should really feel it quite an honour if you would—"

Poor Mr. Denison was quite broken by this offer, which came upon him unexpectedly. He protested, stammered, grew red in the face, and dim in the eyes. He was a gentleman, sensitive,

and not without pride. But he was weak-natured—harassed by difficulties he saw no way out of. Although he repeatedly refused Fred's repeated offers and with perfect sincerity, he did so in a tone which encouraged the young man to think that his yielding was only a question of time and of an adroitly chosen moment.

"At any rate, you're not offended with me for making the suggestion?" Fred asked at last.

He was glad to see that Mr. Denison looked rather disappointed to think that he was taken at his word.

"Offended! No, indeed, my dear boy. One can't afford to be offended at a friendly offer nowadays."

"I daresay, you know, I haven't put it as nicely as I might, and that's why you go on refusing. Of course, my manners are not up to yours. You're refined; I'm not. But I mean what I say, and that's something; if you can't be refined and all that, anyway it's something to be sincere."

"It's everything, in my opinion. I shall

not forget your disinterested kindness, Williams. But what put it into your head I can't think."

"Came like a flash, you know," answered the young fellow, promptly. "Gentleman—handsome, dignified gentleman, credit to the parish—looks humped. What's the cause? Sure to be the old thing—money. Besides, we've a mutual interest, you and I: you're fond of dogs. I suppose you've come up to see those hounds they say Mitchell's got?" he suggested.

For, on reaching the garden palings of Church Cottage, they had both stopped, as if their journey were at an end.

"Well, yes—no; I had come to see Mitchell, certainly; and I have heard about these hounds he's brought back with him. But that wasn't altogether my reason for coming."

He would have babbled out his reason with his usual ingenuousness if Ned had not interrupted the conversation by calling "Good-morning!" approaching them in a leisurely manner at the same time.

"I know what you've come for," he said, with a nod to the younger man. "They're in there. Don't be too familiar, unless you want to leave a pound of flesh with them."

And he jerked his head back in the direction of the room where the bloodhounds were kept. Fred Williams did not wait for further conversation, but raising his hat with great ceremony to Mr. Denison, and shaking his hand warmly, he went through the gate and up to the cottage window. Ned threw at him with some disdain what may be described as half a glance.

"Unlicked cub, that!" he said, not much caring whether the subject of his remark heard it or not.

The guileless and grateful Mr. Denison demurred at this, and Ned did not think the point worth discussing.

"I suppose you didn't come up to talk about dogs?" he asked, drily.

"Why, no. As a matter of fact," said Mr. Denison, with the hesitation of a person unused

to come straight to the point, “I have heard odd reports about; I—I—”

“Have come to the wrong shop, Mr. Denison, if you expect to hear any village gossip from me.”

“Quite so, quite so. But everybody knows now why you’re here,” said Mr. Denison. “And as the man they say you’re after is an admirer of my daughter’s—”

“‘They say’ a lot of things, Mr. Denison, which I’d advise you not to listen to.”

“But I’ve been quite discourteous to this gentleman on the strength of your suspicions ! ”

“Well, I should find some stronger ground to go upon before I was discourteous again.”

“Then you don’t believe these dreadful stories ? ”

“I know nothing of any dreadful stories.”

“Mr. Mitchell, I beg you to be plain with me. Am I right in refusing to have anything to say to—a certain clerical neighbour of ours ? ”

“Mr. Denison, if my advice is worth

anything, have nothing to do with any clerical neighbours."

"Thank you, Mr. Mitchell, that is enough for me. I see you wish to steer clear of libel. But I understand your warning, and I thank you. Vernon Brander shall not enter my house again."

He wished the colonist good-morning, and went back to his farm with a more satisfied conscience. His wife, then, had not been so far wrong in her estimate of the Vicar of St. Cuthbert's, though her treatment might have been open to criticism. But Ned Mitchell looked after him with the tight-lipped smile of contempt with which he was always so ready.

"Does he really think a few mumbling words from him will turn that strong-willed lass, I wonder?" thought he.

And dismissing the subject with a short laugh of derision, his thoughts turned to his hounds, and to a plan which he was nourishing very near his heart.

That very day he resolved to put it into practice. In the early part of the afternoon, therefore, he strolled down to St. Cuthbert's, found the churchyard gate securely fastened, and, making a circuit of the walls, discovered a point where it was of no very formidable height.

"I think my beauties could do that!" chuckled he to himself. And returning straight to his cottage, he remained within doors until the sun began to go down.

Then, going, as he now did without fear, into the room where the hounds, again ravenous with hunger, were yelping and savagely howling, he cowed them with a small whip, which he did not scruple to use cruelly, and securing the animals in a leash, left his little dwelling with them. The hounds were fierce, strong, and difficult to manage. Ned, who still limped in pain from the effects of the bite one of them had given him the night before, cursed them below his breath one moment and burst out into enthusiastic praises of them the next. He

made his way with them direct to St. Cuthbert's, going over the fields. It was growing dusk; the walk was a lonely one; he did not see a single human being as he made his way slowly along, surprised at the ever-increasing pain his wounded limb caused him.

At last he came in sight of the ruined tower, the patched-up walls of which bulged out dangerously, threatening constantly to fall, a mass of ill-assorted fragments of brick, and stone, wood and tiles, into the disused graveyard beneath.

"Steady, my beauties, steady!" said he to the yelping hounds. "Your work is going to begin, my dears! Steady, now, steady!"

And he made his way, with the hounds still straining at the leash, to the spot he had picked out that afternoon.

"There are some old bones for you in there, or I'm much mistaken, that will be worth a king's ransom to me, and a good home for the rest of your days to you, my beauties."

The hounds growled and sniffed, and leaped up about him, as if madly eager to begin their grim hunt. Close up to the wall of the old graveyard he came, and peered over at the irregular mounds, overgrown with rank grass and weeds. There was little daylight left, but his keen eyes could still see dimly into each dark corner, filled with old stones and decaying vegetation. His hands were trembling, stolid as he was, with his eagerness to let the hounds go. His eyes were hungrily roaming over the neglected enclosure where he believed the clue to his secret to lie, when suddenly a sound came to his ears which paralysed his arms and seemed to stop his fast-drawn breath. It was the voice of a little child,

Looking again more intently than before into the chaos of broken and misplaced tombstones, he saw, peering out from behind a tuft of shaggy briar and weed, the face of a little child. It was tiny Kate Brander. Ned looked at the fierce brutes and shivered. Another moment and they would have been loose in the

graveyard, ravenous and blood hungry. Then the expression of his face changed.

"Yes, he has got the best of this move; curse him! But the game's not played out yet."

And, with a lowering face, and slow, heavy gait, he turned, with his yelping brood, towards the road home.

CHAPTER XX.

A STRANGE SICK-NURSE.

THE stolid calmness of Ned Mitchell's every-day demeanour, which was but a mask for strong passions and still stronger resolutions, broke down entirely under his disappointment. If the mouldy old graveyard of St. Cuthbert's had been a paradise of sweet sights and sounds and scents, he could not have been more maddened by the impossibility of entering it. Even the innocent child herself, whose presence among the ruined graves had prevented him from letting his hounds loose, shared his anger.

"They can't keep the brat there always, that's one thing," he said to himself, as he limped along.

He found the return journey over the fields more tedious than he—a strong, healthy man, used to bear great fatigues without any ill effect—could have thought possible. The hounds

were growing every moment more troublesome, straining harder at the leash, snapping and yelping the while. The wound in his injured leg was beginning to smart and burn, the muscles were swelling most painfully, and long before he reached Rishton Hill every step was causing him acute agony. The last field he had to cross brought him out into the road almost opposite the farmyard gate of Rishton Hall. Leaning against the gate and stroking the shaggy head of a poor old mongrel which had attached itself to the farm since she had been there, was Olivia Denison. She looked very sad, and stared out at the fields and the grey hills beyond with a face out of which all the bright, girlish vivacity seemed for the moment to have gone. She started and blushed on seeing Ned Mitchell, who had succeeded in reducing his unruly pets to something like submission, but whose temper had been by no means improved in the task.

“Oh!” she cried, running through the gate and coming fearlessly within the range of

the leash, "are these the dogs I've heard about?"

"How should I know what you've heard?" snapped Ned. "But I know what you'll feel in a minute if you come within reach of the brutes' jaws."

For answer to this speech, Olivia stooped and laid her hand with a firm touch on the head of the animal nearest to her. Whether he had been cowed by Ned's course of treatment, or whether there was something peculiarly sympathetic to animals in her bold manner of approaching them, the dog only gave an ungracious growl, but made no attempt to resent her advances more actively.

"And are these—bloodhounds?" she asked, almost with bated breath.

"Yes, that's what they are," answered Ned, as if he had been challenged.

Olivia's breath came more quickly as, still looking down at the brutes, and even playing with the ears of one of them, she listened and evidently read the meaning of his tone.

"What have you got them for?" she asked, raising her head suddenly, and looking at him askance.

"I've got them to play sexton for me in St. Cuthbert's churchyard: to dig up some bones there that were buried with less ceremony than they ought to have had."

"There are a good many bones in that old churchyard. How do you know your hounds will dig up the right ones?"

"It's sixty years since any body was buried there—until ten years ago."

"And if you should happen to come upon these bones, and even be sure they are the right ones, how will you be sure who put them there?"

"I don't say I shall. But at any rate it will be a step in the right direction. And I shall have my eye on any likely folk who may be about, and see how they take the discovery."

"It seems to me you're no better than a detective," burst out Olivia, hotly.

"Well, I hope I'm no worse," said Ned, laconically.

Olivia turned her head away, looking hurt and anxious.

Ned, who liked and admired the girl, felt a little sorry. He moved off with his dogs, and began to whistle; but the pain of starting again made him break short off and draw his breath sharply through his teeth. This attracted Olivia's attention; she watched him as he laboured up the hill, and before he had gone very far she ran after him.

"What's the matter with you, Mr. Mitchell?" she asked. "You walk lame to-night. Have you hurt yourself?"

"No. And what's that to you if I have?" he answered, curtly.

"Nothing, if you don't think sympathy worth having."

Ned stopped. The strong-limbed, plucky women he had got used to in Australia, and from whom he had chosen his own wife, were rather lacking in graceful feminine ways; so

this pretty speech and gentle tone, coming from a girl whose spirit he admired, touched and softened him.

"What are you up to now?" he asked, gruffly enough, but not without betraying signs of a gentler feeling than he would have owned to. "I know better than to think you'd trouble your head about an old bear like me if you didn't want to get something out of me."

"Well, I want to get the pain out of you—and perhaps a little of the surliness too," she added, archly.

"The first would take a doctor, and the second would take a magician."

"Are you going to have a doctor?"

"No. I can't go after one myself, and my establishment doesn't include anybody I could send."

"I'll send for one. I'll get one of the farm boys to go; or, if there isn't one about, Mat Oldshaw will go, I know."

Ned looked at her cynically.

"Poor Mat," said he. "And to think I

was fool enough myself once to run errands for a girl who thought herself as far above me as heaven from earth. When all the time she was dying of love for another chap, too. Just the same—just the same."

Olivia blushed and looked annoyed, but she answered, quietly—

"Mat would do a kind deed for any one, Mr. Mitchell. And I should be sorry for him to think that it is a sign of great wisdom to be discourteous to a woman."

"Very good," said Ned, grimly. "Sorry I haven't time to let you exercise your wit on me a little longer. Good-night."

He hobbled up the hill with great and evident difficulty, his dogs slinking behind him. He was absolutely faint with pain by the time he reached home.

It was quite dark in the cottage when he arrived, and he made his way at once to a shelf in a passage where a box of matches and a candle were kept. But he felt from end to end of the shelf without being able to find either. The

dogs, having become excited since their entrance, sniffed about the floor, yelped and pulled afresh at the leash, impeding his movements. He had shut the front door on entering, relying on his candle and match-box ; so that he could not even see the forms of the struggling animals to avoid them. Two or three times he stumbled and set them growling as he groped his way towards the room where he kept them shut up. A dizziness was creeping over him, which seemed from time to time almost to overcome him, while occasionally for a moment it seemed to leave his head again perfectly clear. He remembered, or thought he remembered, that he had left the door of the room wide open for ventilation ; but now he went the whole length of the wall, feeling with his disengaged hand, without finding any opening. The hounds meanwhile were growing more excited—more troublesome than ever ; so that, in his dizzy and wearied condition, he could not move or even think with his usual precision. Their behaviour, however, at last roused a suspicion in his mind.

"Somebody's been in here," he muttered to himself. "And the dogs know it by the scent."

He had grown bewildered in the darkness, and no longer knew in what part of the passage he was standing, as the dogs, still straining to get free, pulled him from side to side. Suddenly he heard the faint creaking of a door. The dizziness was coming upon him again, and he turned, in a half-blind, stupefied way; saw, or thought he saw, a faint light come as if through an open door, and the next moment found himself lying on the floor, while the sound of the hasty shutting of another door behind him fell upon his dull ears. After this he became unconscious.

When Ned came to himself, it was a long time before he could remember, even in the vaguest manner, the experiences he had just gone through. He fancied himself in one of the dungeons he had read about in his boyhood, which bold, bad barons built under their castles for unlucky prisoners who fell into their hands.

In strange contrast to the prosaic reflections which occupied his mind in every-day waking hours, the most fantastic fancies now passed through his brain ; that he was a prisoner, flung down here by an enemy ; that fetters of red-hot iron had been fastened to one of his legs. He thought he heard the sounds of every-day life, muffled by the thick stone ceiling between, in the castle above him ; the noises of animals ; sounds of a man's voice ; then of a woman's. He recognised the tones of the latter, he felt sure, though he could not remember the possessor's name. Then suddenly a light was struck in his dungeon and a hand touched him, and it flashed upon him that he had come back, that he was in his own cottage lying on the stone floor of the passage, with a grey-bearded man kneeling beside him, and a woman's skirt brushing against his feet.

"He must have fallen very heavily," whispered the woman.

And Ned's senses came fully back to him.

"Of course," he murmured to himself, "it's Miss Denison."

"He can't have fallen as heavily as that unassisted," said the grey-bearded man, whom Ned now knew to be the doctor.

"Do you mean that he was thrown down?" asked Olivia, in a whisper of tragic earnestness.

"Yes. Look at the blood on the stones."

"Oh!" The girl's teeth chattered with horror.

There was a pause, while the doctor lifted him gently.

"That's the leg he limps with," said the girl.

The doctor touched the wounded limb gently, but the action made Ned moan.

"What shall I do with the dogs?" asked Olivia, presently, in the same low voice. "I think they are kept in one of these rooms. My father said so."

"Turn the brutes loose in the garden."

But Ned, though the movement caused him acute pain in his injured leg, struggled up on one arm and shook his head feebly.

"No, no," he said, in a weak, husky voice; "I'm going to be ill, I know. Take me upstairs to my room, and put the dogs into the room on the opposite side of the landing."

"Oh, come, we can't have that. It wouldn't be a proper arrangement at all—most unhealthy," objected the doctor.

Ned glared at him, and instantly began to try, in a dogged manner, to get up.

"If you won't do it, or let it be done, why, hang you! I'll do it myself," he panted out.

"I'll do it, Mr. Mitchell," said the girl's clear voice.

Ned heard her go upstairs, soothing and encouraging the hounds, which scrambled and shuffled up after her.

"That's a good plucked 'un," he then remarked to the doctor.

And satisfied now that his savage pets were safely disposed of, he fell back on the doctor's arm. For there was a curious buzzing noise in his ears, and his head felt alternately very heavy and very light. He wanted to keep his senses

clear until the young girl should come down again, but it was only by a strong and exhausting effort that he succeeded. As soon as she reached the bottom stair, Olivia heard him addressing her in a faint voice.

"Thanks—thanks for what you've done. I'm not ungrateful. Now get me some one—to look after me—who's got a little nerve. For I don't care—how they treat me—but they must take care—of my dogs. For somebody wants to get at my dogs, I know. And they must be prevented—prevented. You'll see to this. Promise me."

"Yes, I will, I promise," said Olivia, in a firm voice, afraid that she was speaking to a dying man.

She had scarcely uttered the words when he again became insensible.

Olivia was in sore distress as to the manner of fulfilling her promise. On the one hand, she had to keep her word by finding a nurse for him who would not be afraid of the hounds; on the other, she was particularly anxious that, if he

should grow delirious his ravings should not be heard by any one who would chatter about them.

"We must get him to bed," said the doctor, as she stood debating this difficulty. "The young man who came for me—is he about?"

"Mat Oldshaw? Oh, yes, I expect so. He stayed in the garden when we came in. He wouldn't go away without asking if there was anything more he could do."

"Ask him to come in, if he is there, please."

Olivia went out into the garden. As she passed under the porch, she saw a man slink limping away from the side of Mat, who was standing near the gate, and pass behind a bushy screen of evergreens. She sprang forward to the gate, but the man had gone out of sight.

"Mat," she asked, in a frightened voice, "who was that?"

"Nobbut a tramp," he answered. "Nobody to freight yer. It's ten yeer an' more since he wur in these parts."

"Oh, no, it isn't," said Olivia, decidedly.

" He was here four months ago. His name is Abel Squires, isn't it ? "

" Ay, that be his neame, sure enough," answered Mat, with surprise. " Wheer did you happen upon him ? "

" Never mind. I want to know what he's doing about here ? "

" He wants to get a sight o' Mester Mitchell, he says."

" But what did he sneak away like that, for, when he saw me come out, instead of waiting to ask if he could see him ? "

" He doan't want to be seen aboot here, he says."

" Mat," cried the girl, earnestly, after a few moments' thought, " Mr. Mitchell has been knocked down and hurt. The doctor wants you to help carry him upstairs. I wonder if it was this tramp who did it."

" Noa, Miss, but Ah knew who did," said a rough voice so close to her that it startled her.

She turned and saw the one-legged man

whose conversation with Vernon Brander she had overheard in the churchyard. The ground was so soft with recent rains that his wooden leg had made no noise as he approached. Olivia drew her breath sharply through her teeth and felt cold with terror as she looked at his weather-worn, strangely inexpressive face. Here, she thought, was the man whose silence about that miserable night's work of ten years ago Vernon had so much difficulty in procuring. And he had come with the expressed purpose of seeing Ned Mitchell, whom she looked upon as Vernon's avowed enemy.

"You know who knocked Mr. Mitchell down?" she said, faintly.

"Ay," said Abel Squires, with a nod.

She had a fancy that this man was trying to implicate Vernon, and she scarcely dared to frame her next question.

"You mean that you saw him do it?" she asked, after a short pause.

"Ah werr standin' in 's bit o' garden at back theer," said he, jerking his head in the direction

of the cottage. "An' Ah see a mon go in, and after a bit Ah see him coom aht. An' if Mester Mitchell wur knocked deaun," he went on, doggedly, "Ah say Ah knew t' mon as did it. An' it beant naw good to ask me who t'was, for Ah mean to keeap me awn counsel; Ah'm used to 't."

Olivia did not know what to make of the man. Though his voice was rough, his manner of speech was mild, and betrayed no hostile feeling towards anybody.

"Are you a friend of Mr. Mitchell's?" she asked, tentatively.

"Ay," nodded Abel, good humouredly. "He's never done naw harm to me."

Seized with a bold idea, Olivia scanned the man narrowly from head to foot.

"Will you tell me what business brought you to see Mr. Mitchell?" she asked, frankly.

Abel Squires examined the girl's face closely in his turn.

"What do you knew abaht it?" he asked, shortly.

"I know that he is trying to find out a secret: a secret which I think you know."

"Maybe Ah do; maybe Ah doan't; anyhow, Ah doan't prate abaht it!"

"Then what do you want to see Mr. Mitchell for?"

"Ah think he got summat aht o' me last toime Ah see him; Ah want to know how mooch."

The girl's face cleared.

"Could you nurse a sick man?" she asked.
"Mr. Mitchell is ill, delirious, and I don't want to trust him to any prattling old woman."

"Ay," said Abel, promptly; "Ah can do't."

"Come in with me, and let us see what the doctor says," said Olivia, leading the way into the cottage with eager footsteps.

She was surprised at her own daring in taking this step; but she argued with herself that if the tramp, possessing Vernon's secret, as she knew he did, should wish to turn informer, there was no possibility of preventing him, while he

would be within reach of Vernon's influence as long as he was attending on the sick man. If, on the other hand, he was loyally anxious to keep it, there could be no better person to watch over the man from whom she wished to keep the truth.

The doctor asked Abel a few questions, and agreed that he might be tried as sick nurse. Tramp though he was, Squires was a man of some intelligence, and had picked up many a scrap of practical knowledge in the wanderings in which his life had been almost wholly spent. Before the doctor and Olivia had left the house, they felt that the patient was in no unskilful hands, while the hounds were under control of a man entirely without fear.

As she left the cottage, after listening fearfully for some minutes to the incoherent mutterings of its unlucky tenant, Olivia met Mat, who was dutifully waiting in the garden to learn whether she had any more work for him. She stopped short on seeing him, and said, "Oh!" in some confusion.

"What is it?" asked Mat, whose loyal admiration for her made him quick of apprehension. "You want summat more done. Whatever it mebbe, Ah'm ready to do't."

"You are good, Mat," she said gratefully, with a bright blush. "Nobody is ever as ready to help me as you, or so quick to know when one wants help."

"Ah knew more'n that," said Mat, encouraged by her praise. "Ah knew, Ah guess, what you want done."

The colour in Olivia's cheeks grew deeper than ever. She said nothing, however; so Mat, after a short pause, went on, "You want somebody to know what's happened."

Olivia laughed bashfully. "You're an accomplished thought reader, Mat. Who is the person?"

"Parson Vernon."

"Well, don't you think he ought to know, as—as he's a friend of Mr. Mitchell's?"

"Ay," said Mat. "Ah'll go straight off to him neow."

"Thank you, Mat. And be sure you don't forget to tell him that Abel Squires is going to nurse him."

"Ah'll mahnd that. Good-night, Miss Olivia."

"Good-night, Mat. I don't know what I should have done without you this evening."

Mat blushed. "You knew, Miss," he said, in a bashful, strangled voice, "you're as welcome as t' flowers in Meay to aught as Ah can do—neow and any toime."

And he pulled off his cap awkwardly without looking at her, and ran off down the hill before he had even stopped to replace it; while Miss Denison, much more leisurely, started on her way home to the farm.

Long before Ned Mitchell's illness was over, poor Olivia had grave reason to repent her choice of an attendant. Old Sarah Wall, who had been in the habit of coming in for a couple of hours daily to do the cleaning, was now installed permanently on the ground floor, which she had all to herself. The front door was kept

on the chain, and to all inquirers it was Mrs. Wall's duty to answer that Mr. Mitchell was getting on very well, but was not allowed to see any one. If any further questions were put to her, or a wish expressed to see his attendant, she put on a convenient deafness, and presently shut the door. No one was admitted but the doctor, even when Ned was well enough to sit up at the front window, with one or other of his fierce hounds at the side of his chair, and his odd-looking attendant in the background. The evident good understanding which existed between master and man filled Olivia with foreboding, and caused still deeper anxiety to Vernon Brander, who, having called at the cottage day after day, and failed to extract any information from Sarah Wall, deliberately walked round to the back garden and climbed into one of the windows of the upper floor by means of the water-butt. Here he came face to face with Abel Squires, who, hearing the noise, came out of his master's room to find out the cause. He tried to retreat on seeing

Vernon, but the latter seized his arm and detained him.

"Look here," said he, in a low voice, but very sternly; "you've broken faith, I see."

Abel's wooden face never changed.

"Well," said he, doggedly, "Ah doan't say Ah haven't. Boot it was forced aht o' me when Ah wur droonk. That's all Ah have to say."

And to demonstrate this he folded his arms tightly, and met the clergyman's eyes stubbornly and without flinching.

"So that man knows everything?" asked Vernon, in a low voice, glancing at the door of Ned Mitchell's room.

"Pretty nigh all as Ah knew."

Vernon's face was livid. He leaned against the window-sill and looked out fixedly into the Vicarage garden.

"He can't do anything," he muttered.

"He means to try," said Abel. "Hast tha seen t' dogs?"

"No, but I've heard about them; and they won't help him much," answered Vernon, quietly.

"'Tarn't easy to trick 'un,'" said Abel, warningly. "He's none so over sharp, but he's sure."

Vernon said nothing to this; but, after a short pause, he bade Abel good-day very shortly, and went downstairs. Old Sarah Wall was standing at the door, in colloquy with some one outside. She cried out when she felt a man's hand on her shoulder; and Vernon, hastily telling her to be quiet, drew back the chain and let himself out. He started in his turn on finding himself face to face with Olivia Denison. Being overwhelmed with anxiety on his account, it was only a natural result of her girlish modesty that she should appear freezingly cold and distant in her manner towards him, even though her curt greeting caused him evident pain. After the exchange of a very few indifferent words, Vernon raised his cap stiffly and left her; while she, angry with him, still more angry with herself, walked slowly down the hill, more anxious, more miserable, on his account than ever.

It was on the ninth day after the beginning of his illness that Ned Mitchell, whose impatience to be well materially retarded his recovery, could at last bear confinement no longer, and seized the opportunity of a short absence of Abel's in the village to make his way once more down to St. Cuthbert's churchyard. He wanted to take his hounds with him, but decided that it would be rash to do so until he was more sure of his own powers of reaching his destination. For he found, much to his own disgust, that he felt weak and giddy. However, he set out on his walk as quickly as he could, taking his way over the fields to escape observation. Evening was closing in—an evening in late June, warm and balmy. He chose to set down to the summer heat the dizziness which he felt creeping over him long before the ruined tower of St. Cuthbert's came in sight.

When he reached the lane which divided the last field from the churchyard, his head swam and he staggered across the road and caught the gate for support. After a minute's rest, he raised

his head and looked over into the enclosure. Was he delirious again? Had the wild fancies of his illness come back to torment him? He saw before him, instead of broken, moss-grown headstones, rank weeds, and misshapen mounds of earth and rubbish, a churchyard as neat and trim as that of Rishton itself, with tombstones set straight in the ground, well gravelled paths, and borders of flowers. The churchyard wall was garnished along the top with broken glass, and two notice boards, respectively at the right and left hand of the gate, bore these words: "Visitors are requested not to pluck the flowers," and "Dogs not admitted."

This last inscription reassured Ned as to the state of his own brain. He laughed savagely to himself, and, after a few minutes' rest, which he spent in grim contemplation of the altered churchyard, he turned to go home.

Whether he had "got his second wind," or whether the rage he felt stimulated his powers, Ned returned home much faster than he came. Just outside the cottage gate he met Sarah Wall,

wringing her hands and muttering to herself in deepest distress.

"What's the matter with the woman?" asked Ned in his surliest tones.

"Oh, sir! the dogs, the dogs! It warn't my fault: it warn't indeed! How they got out I know no more than the babe unborn!"

"Got out!" shouted Ned, with fury. "What the d—. You wretched old woman! Are they lost? Have they got away?"

"Oh, sir, don't 'e speak like that; don't 'e look so; it warn't my fault. Abel should have been there to look after 'em."

Ned kept down his rage until he got out of her what he wanted to know.

"What happened, then? Tell me at once, quietly. Where are the dogs?"

"Oh, sir, they're in there," said the old woman, pointing with a trembling finger to the cottage. "And not if you was to flay me alive could I tell you how——"

But Ned did not stay to listen. He was up the garden path and through the porch before

she could utter half a dozen words. An oath and a howl of rage burst from his lips at the sight which met his eyes. Stretched on the floor of the stone passage lay the dead bodies of the two bloodhounds, foam and blood still on their jaws, their attitude showing that they had expired in great agony. Ned hung over them for a moment, touched them ; they were scarcely cold. Then he stood bolt upright with a livid face.

“They have been poisoned !” he whispered, in a harsh, gurgling voice.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE "VICARAGE" HAYMAKING.

NED MITCHELL was not the sort of man to waste much time in the indulgence of an outbreak of passion. After a few minutes' contemplation of the dead bodies of his hounds, he pulled himself together and prepared for action. There had flashed into his mind the recollection of the evening on which his illness began. He had forgotten until that moment all the details of his arrival home, his groping about for a light, the sounds he had heard as of a person moving in one of the rooms, and the glimpse he had caught of an opening door as he fell senseless to the floor. It now occurred to him for the first time, as he went over the small incidents of that night one by one, that the fall from the effects of which he was suffering was caused by a heavy blow from some one who

had forced an entrance into the little cottage during his absence.

"A murderous blow!" he muttered to himself as—alone, in the dusk, with his dead hounds encumbering the ground at his feet—he staggered along by the walls, reproducing the sensations he had felt just before his fall. "It must have been in here that he was hidden," he went on to himself, as he found himself at the door of the room where he had first kept his hounds. "For it was on my right hand as I came in that I heard the noise; I am sure of it." Speaking thus, slowly, to himself, he at last turned the handle and went into the unused room. It was musty and close, and he had to open the windows before he could breathe freely. He had a match-box in his pocket; striking a light, he examined every corner of the empty room with the utmost care, and discovered at last, close to the wall in a nook where the light from the windows scarcely penetrated, two dried-up, evil-smelling scraps of meat. "Ah!" said he to himself. "Poisoned, of course! And

as the first attempt wouldn't do, we had to try again."

He removed the meat carefully from the room, and hid it away for further examination. Poor, trembling Mrs. Wall having by this time returned to her place in the kitchen, he went in and asked her, in a dry voice, if she had heard anybody about the place in his absence.

"No, sir," quavered she. "Indeed I didn't."

"You were out, of course."

"No, sir; at least, I'd only gone just half-way down t' hill as far as t' post-office, to get in a pound of sugar because you're out of it, sir; and I give you my word, sir, I'd never ha' gone if I hadn't ha' thought as Abel was upstairs, and—"

"And you came back just a minute or two before I did?"

"Yes, sir; not so very long."

"Not long at all, or you'd have had the whole village up here, poking and prying into every corner, I know," said Ned, grimly. "And

when you opened the door you saw the dogs lying as they are lying now?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you've heard nobody about?"

"No, sir; at least, no, not to-day."

"Not to-day! Then you have heard somebody in the place since I've been ill?"

"Oh, no, sir, not nobody to matter—nobody at all. Only one day, as I wur talking to Miss Denison from t' Hall, as wur at t' door asking about you, I wur pushed aside quite sudden-like; and when I looked it wur parson Brander."

She lowered her voice to a whisper as she uttered the name. For, in spite of her cautious way of putting it, Sarah Wall felt a decided suspicion that the Vicar of St. Cuthbert's, against whom her prejudice was strong, was at the root of this business.

"I don't know where he come from, sir," she croaked on, rather mysteriously. "But it wasn't through t' door, for it wur on t' chain."

Ned, having got out of her all she had to tell, turned with an abrupt nod, left the kitchen, and again went out into the garden. Abel Squires, who was hobbling up the hill on his crutch, redoubled his pace when he saw his master at the gate.

"So ye're aht, Ah see," he called out, as soon as he was near enough. "Ah guessed how 't would be as soon as my back wur turned."

As he drew nearer he saw by his master's face, not only that he was greatly fatigued, but that something serious had happened.

In a few short sentences Ned told him the events which had occurred in his absence : his visit to St. Cuthbert's, the finding of the dogs' bodies, and the discovery of meat which he believed to be poisoned.

"Wall tells me," said he, "that Vernon Brander got into the place one day while I was laid up."

Abel nodded.

"Reight enough: so he did. Got in at t' oopper floor by t' water boott."

"What reason did he give?"

"Wanted to know how much you knew. So Ah told him. He's been going about like a churchyard ghost ever since. Ah met 'un just now on 's way oop to t' Vicarage."

"To the Vicarage?"

"Ay."

"Well, I'm going up there now."

And he turned and began to walk up the hill. Abel hopped after him, assuming his most persuasive mien.

"Doan't 'e, Mester Mitchell—doant 'e," he entreated. "It's naught but cruelty to him as hasn't done it; an' as for him as has, you've got plenty in store for him wi'out worriting of him now."

Ned paid not the slightest heed to these remonstrances, but went on his way, still closely attended by Abel the length of the Vicarage garden wall.

Abel redoubled his pleadings as they caught sight of the two brothers and Mrs. Brander walking in the garden.

"Look 'e here, Mester Mitchell," said he, in a rough voice that, plead as he would, could get no softer. "Ah've kept away from Rishton ten year fur to please parson Vernon, 'cause Ah'm t' only chap as see what happened that neight, an' he wouldn't trust me to hawd ma tongue. What Ah could do fur ten year, couldn't you do fur a neight."

Still Ned walked stolidly on, vouchsafing no answer, until the party in the garden caught sight of them, and the Vicar of Rishton came down to the side gate to meet them. As he drew near, Abel, after one futile attempt to drag Ned bodily away, tried to escape himself. But Mr. Brander was too quick and too strong for him.

"Why, who have we here?" he said curiously, seizing Squires by the arm, and looking into his wooden face. "Isn't it Abel Squires, the man who picked up my father's signet ring on the Sheffield road?"

"Ay, sir," said Abel, very bashfully, while he persistently avoided meeting the vicar's eye.

"I thought so," said the vicar, good-

humouredly. And without noticing the lowering expression of Ned's face, he turned and shook his hand. "Glad to see you about again, Mr. Mitchell. I must tell you a story about our friend here," he continued, putting a kind hand on the tramp's shoulder. "Years ago, when I was scarcely more than a boy, my father lost a signet ring one night as he was returning home from a sick bed. It was an old-fashioned thing; much too large for his finger. He never expected to see it again; but a fortnight afterwards who should turn up but Abel Squires, inquiring of the servants if anybody in the house had lost a ring. He had picked it up, and having no means of advertising his find, had perseveringly called at house after house on the outskirts of Sheffield where he found it, until at last he got directed to my father as the owner. He was so much struck by the circumstance that he declared it should be treasured up for ever by the head of the family as a reminder that the world had contained at least one ideally honest man."

"You're t' head of t' family, yet you don't wear it, though, parson," said Abel, glancing at his hands.

He had listened in much confusion to the account, changing from his wooden leg to his sound one and back again, and looking as if the vicar's speech contained some revelation particularly painful for him to hear.

The vicar, who had been touched by his excessive modesty, was surprised by this retort.

"No, I don't wear it now," he said, laughing genially. "I did, though, until I had the misfortune to lose it myself, some years ago. It was too large for me, as it had been for my father, and I never knew how it had gone. And you were not about to find it for me."

"Nay, sir," was all Abel said, with one shy glance at the bystanders.

They had formed a strange group while the vicar's recital lasted. Each one seemed to know that something serious was impending, and to listen, in silence not all attentive, to the vicar's innocently told reminiscences. He was the only

person at ease in the little circle. Ned was standing, stolid and square, listening to Mr. Brander's little story with a contemptuous face; Vernon Brander, who seemed of late to be growing daily more lean, more haggard, kept his eyes fixed upon Ned with an expression of undisguised apprehension; while Mrs. Brander, whose great black eyes were flashing with excitement to which she allowed no other vent, looked steadily from one to the other of the rest of the group, as she stood a little away from them all, motionless and silent, like a beautiful statue.

When the vicar's prattle had come to an end, there was a pause. He seemed himself to become at last aware that the minds about him were occupied with some more serious matter, and he turned to Ned with a look of inquiry—

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Mitchell?" he asked. "You look less happy than a man should do who has just been released from the confinement of a sick bed. Can I advise you or counsel you in any way? Would you like to come into my study?"

Ned raised his head and looked at him like a bull in the arena.

"No," he said, savagely, "the garden will do for what I have to say. It's only this: My bloodhounds have been poisoned"—a little shiver of intense excitement seemed to run through the group—"and by the same hand that killed my sister. Now I give the man who did both those acts till this time to-morrow to confess publicly that he's been a great hypocrite for ten years, with good words on his lips and bad thoughts in his heart. But if in those four-and-twenty hours he don't confess, then he shall be buried at the country's expense before the year's out."

There was dead silence after this speech, which Ned delivered, not in his usual coarse, loud tones, but in husky, spasmodic jerks, and with the manner of a man bitterly in earnest. The vicar listened with great attention; Abel Squires seemed to wish, but not to dare, to move away; Vernon shook from head to foot with high nervous excitement; while Mrs. Brander

moved to the side of her brother-in-law, and stole her hand within his arm.

Not a look, not a movement, was lost on Ned, whose features suddenly broke up into a grim and horrible smile as he noted the action of the lady. It was a smile of cunning, of mockery. But Mr. Brander had treated him with dislike and contempt.

"You think," said the Vicar of Rishton at last, "that the man who poisoned your dogs was the same who made away with your sister?"

"I don't think: I know."

"I don't want to be hard on you, Mitchell. But it seems to me that you feel the latter loss the more acutely of the two."

"It showed," returned Ned, doggedly, "that the fellow is no better minded now than he was then."

"You might say so if they were human beings whose lives he had taken," said the vicar, continuing his gentle remonstrance. "As they were only dogs, I am inclined to take a more

lenient view; while admitting that this unknown person—”

“No, not unknown,” interpolated Ned.

The vicar went on without noticing the interruption.

“—had no right either to trespass on your premises or destroy your dogs, allowance must be made for the state of mind of a desperate man, who believes, rightly or wrongly, that these animals will be used to discover his guilt.”

“Well, vicar,” said Ned, who had been staring straight into the clergyman’s face with a cynical smile, “I’ve said my say; that’s what I came here for. Now it’s done, I’ll wish you and your good lady, and Mr. Vernon there, a very good-night.”

The vicar held out his hand.

“Good-night. You will not be offended with me for saying that I hope Heaven will soften your heart,” he said in a low voice, in the gentle, almost apologetic tones which he always used when touching upon religious matters.

"No, I'm not offended," said Ned, in a hard, mocking voice.

"And will you come to our haymaking tomorrow?" Mr. Brander continued in a lighter tone. "It will be a very simple sort of festivity, but it may serve as a change from your hermit-like solitude and your gloomy reflections."

Ned began to shake his head rather contemptuously, muttering something rather surlily about being "too old to pick buttercups."

"Mr. Williams, of the Towers, will be here," went on the vicar, as pleasantly as ever. "He is exceedingly anxious to make your acquaintance."

The expression of Ned's face changed.

"Is that the Mr. Williams who has been bothering so about repairing the old church down there—St. Cuthbert's?" he asked, with affected carelessness.

And the vicar's expression changed also.

"I believe he did talk about it at one time; but as my brother objected to it, he had

to give up the idea," he said, in a low voice, glancing at Vernon, who was talking with Mrs. Brander.

"Ah!" said Ned, with a look down at his boots and a nod. "Yes, I'll come, vicar, and thank you kindly for your invitation," he said more graciously. "I can't make hay, but I'll be most happy to stand about and look pretty," he added, with a short laugh.

Raising his hat ceremoniously to Mrs. Brander, whom he admired, and whose indifferent concealed dislike therefore irritated him, Ned Mitchell turned on his heel without so much as a glance at Vernon, and made his way down the hill to his cottage, leaning on the arm of Abel Squires, who had bade "t' gentle-fowk" a humble and bashful farewell, and hastened to the support of his patient, upon whom the fatigue and excitement of the evening had begun to tell heavily.

Solemnly and almost in silence, Meredith Brander and his wife then parted from Vernon, who took his lonely way over the fields in a

state of suppressed excitement so acute that on reaching St. Cuthbert's Vicarage he was highly feverish, with a burning head, hot, dry hands, and a mouth that seemed parched and withered. He lay awake for the greater part of the night. Next morning his old housekeeper, not hearing him rise as usual, went up to his room, and found him in a restless, uneasy sleep. Seeing that something was wrong with him, and deciding that it was the result of over-work, Mrs. Warmington applied a characteristically rough-and-ready remedy. She ransacked his wardrobe, selecting everything that was fit to wear, and quitted the room as softly as she had entered it, leaving pinned to his pillow the following note :—

"I see you have had no sleep and are unwell. So I have taken away your clothes and locked the door. If you are ready to promise to stay in bed all the morning, and not to go out to-day, knock three times, and I will bring up your breakfast."

When he woke up, Vernon gave the three knocks, after very little hesitation. He felt so ill that he was glad of an excuse to spend an

idle day—glad too that in this way he could escape the ordeal of the haymaking at his brother's, and a meeting with Olivia Denison. For, haunted as he was by the remembrance of her gentle touch, of her softly uttered words of sympathy as he sat beside her by Mrs. Warmington's fireside, he felt that another cold look, another frigid bow, like those she had given him on their last meeting, would be a torture more than he could bear.

Vernon Brander was far too ignorant of the peculiarities of the feminine character to know the significance of that coldness; he thought that it meant in her what it would have meant in him, a firm determination that all sentiment between them should be for ever at an end. While, as every one knows, if that had been the case she would have been gentle, tender, anxious to soften the cruel blow she was preparing for him, anxious also that there should, after the parting, be a little sentiment left. As it was, poor Olivia, on her side, was suffering a good many torments. While never allowing herself

to believe the worst she heard against Vernon Brander, her common sense was continually warring with her feelings, and calling her all sorts of unflattering names for her prejudice in his favour. She hated and despised him, she loved and respected him, all in a breath. She resolved never to see him again, she determined to encourage him in spite of all opposition, in the course of the same day. But the value of the former resolution may be gauged by the fact that she made it very strongly on the morning of the haymaking, and was bitterly disappointed when, on arriving with her father and step-mother at the big field by the churchyard, where the tent had been put up, she learnt from little Kate that he had sent word to say he could not come.

But Olivia was not to go without admirers. Approaching the tent as she came out of it was Fred Williams, dressed in a light grey suit of a check so large that there was only room for one square and a half across his narrow little chest, a very pale brown hat, and a salmon-coloured

tie. He greeted Mr. Denison effusively, and asked Olivia if he might get her a cup of tea.

"No, thank you," said she, coldly.

But her father, surprised and displeased at her tone, interfered.

"Yes, my dear, I am sure you would like a cup of tea," said he. "Take her to the tent, Fred, and look after her."

Then, as the young man, who looked delighted at her discomfiture, turned to shake hands with her step-mother, Mr. Denison whispered to his daughter, in as peremptory a tone as he ever used to her—

"You mustn't put on these airs, Olivia. Young Williams is a very good fellow, and has obliged me considerably, more than once. I insist on your being civil to him."

Olivia turned white, and bit her lips. A suspicion of the truth, that her father was under monetary obligations to this wretched little stripling, flashed into her mind. She waited very quietly, but with a certain erect carriage of the head which promised ill for the treatment

Fred would receive at her hands. He, however, was not the man to be scrupulous about the way in which he attained his ends. He trotted beside her to the tent in a state of great elation.

"Awfully slow, these bun scuffles, ain't they?" he said, in his most insinuating tones. "I shouldn't have come at all if it hadn't been for the chance of meeting—some one I wanted to see."

This was accompanied by a most significant look; but unfortunately Olivia, who was considerably taller than he, was looking over his head at some fresh arrivals.

"Indeed!" she said, absently.

Fred reddened; that is to say, a faint tint, like the colour in his tie, appeared for a moment in his cheeks, and then left them as yellow as before. He tried again. She should look at him; it didn't matter how, but she should look.

"Those country girls look at me as if they'd never seen anything like this get-up before."

It's the proper thing down in the south, isn't it?"

"I should think so—on Margate excursionists," answered Olivia, briefly.

Fred was quite unmoved.

"Now what would your father say if he heard you?" he asked, good-humouredly. "You know he told you to be civil. Ho, yes, I've sharp ears enough—always catch up anything I want to hear."

Olivia said nothing to this, and presently he went on, in a persuasive tone—

"You know it's worse than wasting your time to be rude to me, because I'm not a bad chap to people I like, and to people I don't like I can do awfully nasty turns."

"Oh, I don't doubt your power of making yourself unpleasant," said Olivia, quietly.

Still Fred Williams only chuckled. They had by this time reached the tent, and he gave her a chair with a flourish of satisfaction.

"There, now you must look up to me to fire off your spiteful little shots, instead of down at

me as if I were a worm or a beetle. It's not many men of my size, mind you, that would walk with a girl as tall as you; it puts a fellow at a disadvantage. And as your six-footers are not too plentiful in these parts, it would be wiser of you to make your peace with the little ones."

"I assure you," said Olivia, looking up at him gravely, "that I could get on very well without either six-footers or four-feet-sixers."

"That's a nasty cut. There's not many fellows would stand that," said the irrepressible one. "But, there, I tell you there's nothing I wouldn't put up with from you. I suppose you won't insult my guv'nor if I introduce him to you," he continued, glancing towards a corner of the tent where the elder Mr. Williams was engaged in animated talk with Ned Mitchell.

"Certainly not;" answered Olivia, "I am told by every one that you could scarcely be known for father and son."

This was true. Mr. Williams, though he was not free from the faults of the parvenu, was ostentatious in his charities and respectful

towards wealth, had a handsome person and a dignified carriage, and was in every way his son's superior. He had been most anxious to make Ned Mitchell's acquaintance, feeling that in this man, who had begun with little and by his own exertions had made it much, he should meet with a congenial nature. And so it proved. Ned having the same feeling towards him, they had become, at their first interview, if not friends, at least mutually well-disposed acquaintances.

When Fred interrupted their *tête-à-tête*, they were deep in a conversation they found so interesting that Mr. Williams, in reply to his son's request that he would come and be introduced to a lady, waved him away, saying, "Presently, my boy, presently."

He came back, laughing at his father's earnestness.

"He and that colonist fellow are so thick already that there's no separatin' 'em," he said to Olivia. "They're at it, hammer and tongs, about the old tower down at St. Cuthbert's, and as the vicar has just come and shoved his little

oar in, I expect they'll be at it till breakfast time."

"The tower of St. Cuthbert's!" exclaimed Olivia, rising hastily from her chair. "What are they saying about that?"

Fred, who noticed everything, saw how keen was the interest she showed.

"Yes. You know my guv'nor was hot on building a new tower to the place, and paying for the repair of it. He likes things brand new, does the guv'nor, and he likes tablets and paragraphs with 'Re-erected by the generosity of F. S. Williams, Esquire, of the Tower's, on 'em. And he was put off it, I don't exactly know how. So Mitchell's working him up to it again."

"Since your father won't come to me, you shall take me to him," said Olivia, brightly, though her lips were quivering.

Fred, still watching her carefully, noticed this also. As they crossed the floor of the tent, he could see that she was straining her ears to catch what she could of the talk of the three men. For Mr. Meredith Brander had now

joined the other two, and was taking the chief share of the subject under discussion. This was no longer St. Cuthbert's Tower, but the recent loss which the colonist had sustained by the poisoning of his hounds.

"My own impression," the vicar was saying, in tones of conviction, "is that you must have caused their death yourself during your sleep."

"How do you make that out, vicar?" asked Ned, very quietly.

Since that outburst of fury the evening before, he had been very subdued—almost amiable.

"Why, I cannot conceive any motive strong enough to induce anybody else to make away with them. If they were really dangerous to some one's secret, poisoning them was too suspicious an act. Besides, my brother—I mean the churchyard of St. Cuthbert's has just been laid out as a garden, and the wall has been fringed with broken glass to keep out all unauthorised intruders. Now what could a man kill your dogs for?"

"I have my own ideas as to the reason," said Ned. Then, after a short pause, he added, "You see, the poisoning of the hounds led to a delay. Now a hunted criminal lives by delays."

"Hunted criminal!" Poor Olivia echoed these terrible words below her breath. The very sound of them blanched her cheeks and seemed to check the beating of her heart.

It was again Ned who spoke—

"Tell me, vicar, what you mean by suggesting that I poisoned my hounds in my sleep."

"Don't you know," said Mr. Brander, "how an active man forced into inaction will brood over an idea until it is never out of his brain? I imagine that you, moved as you certainly were by fears for the safety of your dogs while you were ill, got these fears so strongly in your mind that at last you got up one night, and with your own hands did what it was always in your mind that some one else would do—laid about the poison which the dogs took as soon as they by some means got loose."

"Dear me! Very ingenious theory—very ingenious!" said Mr. Williams.

"I don't suppose," went on the vicar, modestly, "that the idea would have come into my head if it had not been that in my own family there have been marvellous instances of somnambulism. An ancestor of mine, a very energetic man who loved the sound of his own voice, had been ordered a rest from preaching by his doctor. Well, I assure you that after obeying this injunction three months, he got up one night, got the church keys, let himself in, and was discovered there by his wife in the pulpit, preaching a sermon in his dressing-gown and slippers! And there have been numberless other instances in our family—some within this century."

"Dear me, that is singular indeed," said Mr. Williams.

"A very high-spirited family yours, vicar," said Ned, who had not moved a muscle during this recital, "and the spirit is sure to peep out sooner or later. You, I think, though you'll

excuse my saying so, are about the only one of the bunch that hasn't let it peep out rather discreditably."

"Perhaps my sins are all to come," said the vicar with a jolly laugh.

And, catching sight of the two young people who were waiting for a hearing, Mr. Brander himself introduced Olivia Denison to old Mr. Williams, and left the group to join his other guests.

CHAPTER XXII.

NED MITCHELL'S PROMISE.

THE haymaking in the glebe field of Rishton Vicarage was an annual affair, an institution of Meredith Brander's own, dating from the young days of his reign. It had been at its origin a thoroughly radical institution, a freak of the then very youthful vicar, who had not yet quite dropped all the wild ideas for the reconstruction of society of his university days. Rich and poor, gentle and simple, an invitation had been extended to all; the glebe field was to be the scene of such an harmonious commingling of class and class as had not been dreamed of since the dim days of Feudalism. For a year or two both the villagers and the richer class were represented; the former sparsely, it is true. But there was no commingling. Then the villagers, not quite understanding the vicar's idea, began to have a suspicion that, besides being somewhat

bored and bewildered by the entertainment and the necessity for putting on "company manners," they were being laughed at; and thenceforth they stayed away altogether. So that the annual haymaking had now become what Mr. Brander called "a mere commonplace *omnium gatherum*," where the lowest class represented was that of the well-to-do farmers, whose wives and daughters having replaced the straightforward rusticity of half a century ago for a veneer of fashion and refinement, were tiresome guests, captious, self-assertive, and intolerable.

Among the most prominent members of this last class were the two daughters of John Oldshaw. Despising their shy, good-hearted brother Mat as much as they did their coarse-mannered father, they prattled of Gilbert and Sullivan's last opera, of the newest shape of sunshade, of the most recently published novel, uneasily anxious to show that they were abreast of the times. They hated Olivia Denison for her easy superiority; and while indignant with their brother for admiring her, they were still

more indignant at the knowledge that he was too much her inferior for her to treat him with anything but kindness.

Olivia, who was always so scrupulously courteous to these young ladies, shook hands with them as she left the tent with her persistent admirer, Fred Williams, who, with little attempt at concealment, tried to draw her away from the farmer's daughters.

"How charming Mrs. Brander is looking to-day!" said the elder, in the loud, unpleasant voice which shivered in a moment all her pretensions to refinement. "She reminds me more of Lady Grisdale every time I see her."

Lady Grisdale was a fashionable beauty, whose photograph, together with those of the Guernsey Rose and Mrs. Carnaby East, adorned Miss Oldshaw's drawing-room mantelpiece in a plush frame.

"Yes," assented Olivia, "she is like the portraits of Lady Grisdale. How is your brother? Isn't he coming here to-day?"

The Misses Oldshaw disliked any allusion to their brother, who, they considered, did them little credit. And to hear him mentioned by Olivia Denison was especially galling. It seemed to them to signify what indeed was the truth, that she ranked Mat, with his rough speech and shy, awkward ways, above themselves, with all their pretensions. Miss Oldshaw therefore answered with a shrill tartness which surprised Olivia, who had certainly no wish to offend her—

“Oh, he’s not coming here. His tastes don’t lie in the direction of either nice people or nice amusements.”

“Indeed! I should have thought they would, when he’s so nice himself.”

“Oh, of course niceness is a matter of taste,” said Miss Oldshaw, with an affected laugh. “Perhaps you would consider the person he has gone to see nice.”

“Very likely,” said Olivia, coolly.

“Dear me,” interrupted the second sister, with a perceptible sneer; “you forget that Mr.

Vernon Brander may be a friend of Miss Denison's."

"If it is Mr. Vernon Brander whom Mat has gone to see, I don't think he has chosen his pleasure badly. At least he is in pleasanter society than we all have the fortune to meet here."

And Olivia, who had remained very quiet during this disagreeable colloquy, turned away, while her companion burst into a loud fit of laughter, and glancing over his shoulder at the sisters, remarked in a voice which they were intended to hear—

"Why does Mrs. Brander invite those people? Everybody knows they were both sweet on Parson Longface until they found it was no go."

Olivia made no answer to this graceful remark. She was standing close to the hedge which bounded the field on the side nearest to the village. The trees grew thickly outside, and even at five o'clock the sun was strong enough to make the shelter of the overhanging branches

welcome. The devoted Fred had put into her hands a very fanciful little hayrake; but instead of amusing herself by turning over the sweet-scented hay which strewed the field all round her, she only drew the rake listlessly along the ground with an air of being a thousand miles away.

"I'm afraid I bore you," said Fred at last, in an offended tone, finding that all his conversational efforts failed to wake the least sparkle of interest in her eyes; "I should have thought this sort of thing would have been just what you would like: wants such a lot of energy, and all that sort of thing, you know."

"Yes," answered Olivia, dreamingly; "it wants too much energy to be wasted on play, when one has serious things to think about."

"Serious things!" echoed Fred, pricking up his ears, and rushing at this opening. "Yes, I've got a lot of serious things to think about too—one thing jolly serious. I say," he went on, getting rather nervous, "I'm glad you take

things seriously ; I like a girl who can be serious."

"Do you ?" asked she, rather absently. "I should have thought you liked a girl who could be lively."

"Well, yes ; I like 'em both. I mean, I like one who can be both—or, or—"

"Both who can be one, perhaps," suggested Olivia, laughing.

She had had to stave off proposals before from men whom she was anxious to save from unnecessary pain. But with this grotesque little caricature of an admirer she felt no sentiment deeper than a hope that he would not be silly. Insignificant as he seemed to her, however, she made a great mistake in despising him, and in forgetting that a small, mean nature is very much more dangerous than a nobler one. So that while she was innocently trying to avoid the annoyance of his love-making with light words and laughter, he was growing every moment more doggedly bent on doing her the honour of making known his admiration.

Although the possibility of a refusal had not occurred to him, he felt nervous, as he would have felt with no other woman.

"I say, now, be serious a moment, can't you? Or I shall think I paid you too great a compliment just now."

"As I am not used to compliments, perhaps it got into my head."

"Oh, of course I know you have had plenty of fools dangling about you and saying a lot of things they don't mean—"

"So that one more or less hardly counts," suggested Olivia, laughing.

He would not be angry even then. He thought if he affected to drop the subject he should soon bring her to reason; so he said, "Oh, well, of course, if that's your way of looking at it, there's no more to be said."

But she took him at his word, and, with just a nod of assent to his last remark, ran to the hedge, with a cry, "There's Mat!" as she caught sight of Farmer Oldshaw's son standing under the trees.

Fred Williams looked after her with an ugly expression on his little yellow face.

“Fancy my not being common enough for her, by Jove!” was his modest reflection as he saw her shake hands heartily with the young man.

Olivia, with a woman’s quick perception, had known at once that Mat had something of importance to tell her.

“What is it, Mat?” she asked, anxiously, as they shook hands.

“Mester Vernon: he’s very bad wi’ t’ fever,” said he, in a low voice. “Ah allers weaite at corner o’ t’ long meadow o’ Thursday, an’ walk wi’ him as far as Lower Copse, where he goes to ’s meeting. An’ to-deay he didn’t coom, so Ah knew summat wur wrong, an’ Ah went to ’s home, an’ Ah saw him. An’ Ah thowt Ah’d let ye know, Miss Olivia, so Ah coom here to tell ye.”

Olivia had very little shyness with Mat; he knew her secret, and he, too, loved Vernon Brander most loyally. She thanked him in very

few words, but with a look of gratitude in her eyes which stirred in the young man feelings of pain and pleasure she never guessed at.

"I shall manage to get away in a few minutes," she said.

"If you're goin' to see Mester Vernon, you'll let me see ye seafe across t' fields?"

"Yes; I shall be very glad if you will."

With the rapidity of a butterfly, in order to avoid the unlucky Fred Williams, Olivia sped across the scattered hay to the tent where she had left Ned Mitchell and Mr. Williams the elder. They were conversing as earnestly as ever, and certain words which fell upon the girl's ears as she stood waiting for a chance of catching Ned's attention showed that they were still on the old subject.

"You will scarcely believe me, Mr. Mitchell, when I assure you that nothing but the dissuasions of Mr. Meredith Brander and his brother have prevented my doing it long before. However, I have made up my mind not to put up with this sort of thing any longer. I

have no doubt their motives were good—perfectly good. But they are certainly mistaken in letting a private fad for antiquities interfere with the comfort of the parishioners."

"And they won't find on every bush a parishioner rich enough and generous enough to rebuild a church at his own expense," added Ned.

"Oh, well, perhaps not," allowed Mr. Williams, modestly. "Anyhow, I'll get Lord Stannington's permission at once, and the new St. Cuthbert's tower shall be an object of admiration in the neighbourhood before the winter comes."

Ned Mitchell was satisfied; he had sowed the seed well. Having now leisure to look round him, he perceived that Olivia, standing by herself, with her eyes fixed earnestly upon him, was waiting for speech with him. With her feminine grace, her high spirit and her devotion, she was a girl after his own heart; what little of amiability there was in his character always appeared in his face and manner when he addressed her.

"Oh, Mr. Mitchell," she said, in a low, pleading voice, as he nodded to Mr. Williams and walked out of the tent with her, "I want to ask you not to be hard."

"Too late—too late by fifteen years, Miss Denison," said he, not harshly, however. "But what particular proof of hardness have I given you just now?"

"You know," said she, tremulously; "the new tower—St. Cuthbert's tower——"

Ned Mitchell stopped short, and made her turn face to face with him.

"It seems to me, young lady," said he, "that you haven't much faith in your lover."

"Mr. Vernon Brander is not my lover," said she, blushing.

"Not to the extent of having asked you to name the happy day, perhaps. But whether you confess it or not, I know that if Vernon Brander were free to marry, he might have you for the asking."

"Well, yes, he might," said poor Olivia, raising her head proudly one moment, and the

next letting it fall in confusion and shame. "And I confess I don't feel sure whether he has done this dreadful thing or not; and—and that it wouldn't make any difference if he had. And it's because I don't feel sure that I'm come to beg you not to have St. Cuthbert's tower touched. And I've just heard that he's ill, and I'm very miserable about it. There, there—now I think I've humiliated myself enough to you."

They were in the open field, with young men and maidens on either side making more or less shallow pretences at haymaking. Olivia could not indulge the inclination that prompted her to burst into a rage of passionate tears. But she was almost blinded by the effort to keep them back; and Ned Mitchell had to guide her steps between the haycocks, which he did gently enough.

"Look here," he said, in a voice which could only express feeling by jerks; "I don't want to hurt you. There's nobody I wouldn't sooner hurt, I think. You're a brave girl. I like you.

I approve of you. Hold your tongue, and I'll promise you something."

The last admonition was unnecessary ; she was quiet enough.

"I give you my word. Now, mind, you're not to shout out." She shook her head. "I give you my word no harm shall come to—somebody."

"Mr. Vernon Brander?" she asked, in a whisper.

"Yes."

"Oh, Mr. Mitchell, you are good, then, after all!" she said, with naïve earnestness and gratitude.

"Don't be too sure of that. But I do keep my word. He's ill, you say?"

"Mat Oldshaw has just told me that he is in a fever."

"And you are going to see him? What would your father say?"

"I can't help it. I must—I must. He has no friends to visit him."

"Oh, yes, he has. Mark my words : as soon

as she hears of it, his sister-in-law will fly to his side."

Olivia seemed to shrink into herself with a shiver at these words. Her warm-hearted outburst of grateful confidence was over.

"What do you mean to imply?" she asked, coldly.

"Nothing—nothing but just what I say. You may tell Vernon that I am coming this evening to look after him. Here you are. You can slip through this gate and be off under the trees and down through the village. And I'll make up a story for your step-mother."

He opened the gate for her, and let her through. Olivia scarcely dared to believe that he would keep his promise of doing no harm to Vernon; still, his kindness to herself was encouraging, and, in spite of doubts and fears, pangs of jealousy of Mrs. Meredith, self-reproach for acting against her father's wishes, Olivia felt lighter hearted since Ned Mitchell's promise, and congratulated herself, as she approached St. Cuthbert's Vicarage, and bade good-bye to

faithful Mat, that she was the bearer of good news.

Her heart beat fast as she went up the stone pathway of the barren enclosure before the house. In answer to her knock, Mrs. Warmington opened the door, and uttered a short exclamation, whether of surprise, joy, or astonishment, the visitor could not tell.

"So that's the answer to the conundrum!" was her rather bewildering greeting.

"Is Mr. Vernon Brander at home?" asked Olivia, with some dignity.

But Mrs. Warmington would have none of it.

"Oh, yes, you know he is," she answered, impatiently. "And, what's more, you know he's ill. And he knows you are coming, and of course that's the reason why he wouldn't go back to bed, when he knows as well as I do that bed's the place where he ought to be."

"If he does expect me, it's only guess-work," said Olivia, more softly. "For I've sent him no message, and he has sent me none."

"Oh, the air carries messages between some people," said Mrs. Warmington, impatiently.

"Who is that?" asked Vernon Brander's voice from the front room.

"It is I, Mr. Brander," answered Olivia, in a very meek, small voice.

She opened the door and entered, shyly, with a prim little speech upon her lips, something about "so many inquiries having been made for him that she had offered to come and learn how he was." But she only got out a few words and stopped. He was still standing by the door, and she had not yet looked at him. When she modestly raised her eyes, she read in his face such feelings as put her pretty platitudes to flight.

"Oh!" she said, softly, and clasped her hands, while her lips quivered and her eyes filled. But she instantly recovered herself and became very stately and stiff.

"Come and sit down," said he; and, closing the door, he took her hands in both his, and led her to a battered arm-chair, which stood beside

the worn old sofa from which he had just risen.

Olivia allowed herself to be led to the chair, on which she sat down with some constraint. Mr. Brander took an ordinary cane-seated chair at the other side of the table. There was a silence of some moments. Then the girl spoke.

"I am glad you were not at the haymaking this afternoon, Mr. Brander. The sun was so hot, even up to the time I left, that it was quite as much as we could do to breathe, without the fatigue of making hay."

She did not look at him while she spoke; but as he only said "Yes" in a very faint voice, she slowly turned her head and saw that he was swaying on the table, ashy white and breathing heavily. All her shyness and constraint broke down in a second. She started up, and running lightly round the table, put a strong, supporting arm around him.

"Come to the sofa," she said, gently. "You are not well enough to sit up."

For answer he laid his head against her

shoulder, and looked rapturously into her beautiful face.

"I don't feel ill," was all he dared to say.

Olivia blushed, but did not withdraw her arm.

"That is all nonsense," she said, imperiously. "You are ill, and I believe you want a doctor, and I mean to fetch one. I'm turning nurse to the parish," she went on, merrily; "you know it was I who got the doctor for Mr. Mitchell."

Vernon's face clouded.

"Yes; I know," said he.

"Oh, Mr. Brander," continued Olivia, beginning to stammer and hesitate. "I—I have something to tell you about Mr. Mitchell: something he said—to me, this afternoon."

"Well, what was it?"

"They were talking—he and old Mr. Williams—this afternoon, about the restoration of—of——"

"Of St. Cuthbert's tower?"

"Yes. Mr. Mitchell was persuading him to build a new tower——"

"Persuading him! Clever old fox! There's a proverb about cheating the devil, but I think it would be stronger to talk of cheating Ned Mitchell."

Olivia was surprised by the coolness with which he said this. However, she hastened to add—

"But I don't think it will be rebuilt after all."

It seemed to her that something very like a shade of disappointment crossed his face at these words.

"How is that?" was all he said.

"I spoke to Mr. Mitchell afterwards, and he promised me never to do anything to harm you," said Olivia, in a gentle earnest voice, quite ignoring, in the excitement of this announcement, how much of her own feelings she was betraying.

"Then you think," said he, very quietly, "that the building of a new tower at St. Cuthbert's would do me harm?"

"I—I thought," said Olivia, much confused, "from what I had heard, that you did not wish it to be rebuilt."

"And I suppose you must have some idea why?"

"No," answered Olivia, quickly.

"Quite sure?"

"Of course I have heard what people say."

"If I were a wholly innocent man, how could any discoveries which might be made hurt me?"

"I don't know; I should have thought perhaps they might."

"I can see that your mind is not free from doubts?"

No answer. He was leaning against her, and speaking with difficulty.

"And yet you love me all the same?"

The question burst from his lips in a low, husky, passionate whisper, while his eyes sought hers, and his hand trembled at the contact with her fingers. For answer she flung her right arm round his neck, and pressed her lips tenderly,

fervently on his pale forehead. He shivered in her arms as if seized by a strong convulsion of feeling; then, by a feverish effort tearing himself from her embrace, he leaned against the mantelpiece and buried his face in his hands, murmuring, in a hoarse and broken voice—

“God bless you! And God forgive me!”

Olivia's whole heart went out to him in the deep distress from which he was evidently suffering. She rose, and coming to within a few paces of where he stood, said, most winningly—

“Come and lie down on the sofa. I will read to you, sing to you, do anything you would like done; but you must not stand; you are not well enough.”

He held out his hand to her with a smile that made his haggard face for a moment handsome.

“I will do whatever you wish,” he said, “if you will in return do something I am going to command.”

“What is that?” she asked with a smile.

“Go back home at once. You are here

against your father's wishes, and I am bound in honour to forbid your presence here."

He had already withdrawn his hand from hers ; he dared not trust it to remain there. There was a yearning in his eyes which stirred all the pity, all the tenderness, in her nature for this outcast from love and home and happiness. She tried to take his pathetic command with a laugh, as he had tried to give it. But she failed, as he had done. And so they stood, with only a yard of faded and worn old carpet between them, reading in each other's eyes the longing, she to comfort and he to caress, while the sunset faded slowly outside, and the old clock ticked on the mantelpiece, and faint sounds of the clattering of cups and spoons came from the kitchen.

"There is some one at the gate," said he at last. And he crossed to the window and looked out : "Ned Mitchell!"

Olivia started. She was glad Ned had come while she was there, being anxious to note how he met Vernon.

"Come straight in," called out Vernon from the window.

And Ned came in, with his ponderous walk and keen glance. He nodded to Olivia, and walking straight up to Vernon, examined him attentively.

"So you're on the sick list, I hear," he said, not unkindly. "By the look of you I should say you'll be on the burial list soon if you don't take care of yourself."

Olivia uttered a low cry of horror.

"You want a wife to look after you. Some men can get on best without a woman; I'm one: that's why I'm married. Some can't get on without one; you're one of that sort: that's why you're a bachelor. One of the dodges of Providence to keep us from growing too fond of this precious world, I suppose."

"Well, as I choose to mortify the flesh by remaining a bachelor, it's unkind of you to throw my misfortune in my face, isn't it?" said Vernon, not succeeding very well in the effort to speak in his usual manner.

"Sit down, man," said Ned, peremptorily. "You ought to be in bed. On the other hand, if you knock off your work, who's to do it for you?"

"Nobody; there is nobody; therefore I must not knock off," said Vernon, feverishly.

"Oh, yes, you must. Health's everything," said Ned, with his small, sharp eyes fixed on the floor. "Now I've a proposal to make to you. There's not much of a parson's work a rough man like me can do, but there's some, taking messages and seeing people and things like that. Now it's precious dull up at my hole of a cottage. So I'm coming to stay a day or two with you, and your old woman can put me up in the little room that's next to your bedroom. It's all settled, you understand," he added, lifting his hand and raising his voice peremptorily at the same time.

"It's awfully good of you," said Vernon, though his tone betrayed more curiosity than gratitude. "But, at any rate, if you choose to stay here, you shall have the best bedroom we

can offer you. The little box next to mine is filled with nothing but lumber."

"That's the room I mean to have, though," said Ned, stubbornly. "I'm of a romantic and melancholy disposition, and I like the view. It looks out into the churchyard."

The curiosity died out suddenly from Vernon's face.

"And if I am compelled to assure you that it is impossible that room should be used?"

"Then I shall have to come and encamp in the neighbourhood: that's all."

The men looked straight at each other, and Vernon shrugged his shoulders.

"You can come if you like," said he, indifferently.

Olivia, who had listened with much interest to this discussion, now came forward to bid Vernon good-bye. Ned, with ostentatious discreetness, tramped heavily to the window, and looked out. But he might have spared himself the trouble; for before he got there the ceremony

of farewell was over. Olivia had put her hand in Vernon's, and they had given a brief look each into the face of the other. Ned, as he stared into the bare enclosure outside, suddenly felt a light touch on his arm.

"Good-bye, Mr. Mitchell," said Olivia.
"Don't forget—your promise."

"I never forget anything," said Ned, drily.

The next minute she was hurrying up the lane, with the eyes of both men fixed upon her retreating figure.

"That's a good sort," said Ned, approvingly.
To this Vernon Brander assented very shortly.

Olivia had forbidden Mat to wait for her, but she was not to go home unescorted. At the top of the hill, where the lane joined the high road, she found the irrepressible Fred Williams sitting on a bank, making passes at a white butterfly with his walking stick. Olivia uttered an "Oh!" full of impatience and disgust. Fred got up, grinning at her in obtuse admiration.

"I knew where you'd gone," he said, nodding with a knowing air. "So I came to see you home."

He was still rather nervous, which was perhaps the reason why he failed to perceive the full extent of her annoyance at this second meeting. He had, besides, primed himself for a speech, and that speech he meant to make.

"We were interrupted just now in the hay-field," he began—"just when I was on the point of—"

"Oh, never mind now," broke in Olivia, impatiently, "I have something to think about."

"Well, what I am going to say to you don't require thinking about; I want you to marry me. Yes or no."

"No!" said Olivia, promptly.

"Of course I knew you'd say that first go off. But let me reason with you a little. You must get married some time. You like another fellow better than me—"

"I do—a good many other fellows!"

"Well, but one in particular. Now you can't have him, and you can have me. And if you do have me, you can do a good turn to the other fellow."

"What do you mean?" asked the girl, turning white at the young man's tone.

"If you'll promise to marry me—seriously, mind—I'll persuade my father not to build the new tower to St. Cuthbert's. Nobody but me can stop him. That chap Mitchell is egging him on to it with all his might."

"He's changed his mind," said Olivia, quietly.

"Oh, has he? Since when, I should like to know? He met me sitting here five minutes ago, on his way down to St. Cuthbert's, where you've just come from" (with another knowing nod), "and he gave me this note for my father. I opened it. Won't you read it? All right, but you shall hear what it says."

Fred was holding a part of an old envelope, which had been scribbled on in pencil, and folded. He read it aloud :—

“ DEAR MR. WILLIAMS,—Hurry on the re-building of St. Cuthbert’s Tower as fast as you can. I hear there is a proposal afloat to be beforehand with you, and to deprive you of all the credit of the thing by getting it up by subscription.—Yours, E. MITCHELL.”

Poor Olivia was aghast at Ned’s breach of faith, but she affected unconcern.

“ I don’t see how the building of St. Cuthbert’s tower can affect either me or Mr. Vernon Brander.”

“ Nor do I. But I can see it does. Anyhow, I’ll give you till to-morrow morning to consider the thing, and I’ll meet you in the poultry run when you feed the chickens—if I can get up early enough. And as I see you want to think over it by yourself, I’ll take myself off for the present. Good-evening, Miss Denison.”

He sauntered away in the opposite direction to Rishton, his mischievous good humour

perfectly undisturbed; while Olivia, more concerned for Mr. Vernon Brander than ever, hurried home, and sneaked up to her room to consider the new position of affairs, and to write a pleading note to Ned Mitchell.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

OLIVIA DENISON's thoughts, on the morning after the haymaking, were entirely occupied with Vernon Brander, his illness, the possibility of his innocence, and the chances of his escape if guilty ; so that when, on entering the poultry-yard with her basket on her arm, she found Fred Williams amusing himself by setting two cocks to fight each other, she uttered a cry of unmistakable annoyance and astonishment.

“ You look as if you hadn’t expected to see me, and as if, by Jove, you hadn’t wanted to ! ” said he, frankly. As she made no answer, but only raised her eyebrows, he went on—“ Don’t you remember I said I should be here this morning ? ”

“ I had forgotten it, or only remembered it as a kind of nightmare.”

"Do you mean me to take your rudeness seriously?" asked Fred, after a pause, in which he had at last struggled with the amazing fact that he had met a girl to whom his admiration, and all the glorious possibilities it conveyed, meant absolutely nothing.

"As seriously as I have always taken yours."

Fred was silent again for some moments, during which Olivia went on throwing handfuls of grain to the chickens, and calling softly "Coop-coop-coop-coop!" in a most persuasive and unconcerned manner.

"And you really mean that this is your last answer? I can tell you, it's your last chance with me."

Olivia turned, making the most of her majestic height, and looked down on him with the loftiest disdain.

"I assure you that if it were my 'last chance,' as you call it, not only with you, but with anybody, I should say just the same."

Fred Williams leaned against the wall of

the yard, turned out the heterogeneous contents of one of his pockets, and began turning them over with shaking fingers to hide his mortification.

Still Olivia went on with her occupation, without paying the slightest attention to him. Suddenly the rejected suitor shovelled all the things he had taken out back into his pockets, and with a monkey-like spring placed himself right in front of her.

"I wish there was somebody about to tell you what a jolly fool you're making of yourself," he said, looking up at her rather viciously.

"You may go and fetch somebody to do so if you like," said she, serenely.

"And leave you in peace for a little while, I suppose you mean?"

"Perhaps some such thought may have crossed my mind."

Mr. Fred Williams had not a high opinion of himself, but experience had taught him that his "expectations" gave him an adventitious value; to find neither his modesty nor his

money of any avail was a discovery which destroyed for once his habitual good-humour, and showed a side of his character which he should by all means have kept concealed from a lady he wished to charm.

“Very well,” he snarled, while an ugly blush spread over his face, and his fingers twitched with anger; “very well. You may think it very smart to snub me, and high-spirited and all that. I’ve stood a good deal of it—a good deal more than I’d have stood from anybody else—because you’re handsome. I know I’m not handsome, or refined either; but I don’t pretend to be. And I’m a lot handsomer than the hatchet-faced parson, anyhow. And as for refinement, you can get a lot more for twenty-five thousand a year than for a couple of hundred, which is quite a decent screw for one of your preaching fellows. But now I’ve done with you, I tell you; I’ve done with you.”

“Isn’t that rather a singular expression, considering that I’ve never given you the slightest encouragement?” asked Olivia, coldly.

"Encouragement! I don't expect encouragement; but I expect a girl like you to know a good thing when she sees it."

"I am afraid we differ as to what constitutes a 'good thing.' "

"Very likely; but we shan't 'differ as to what constitutes' a bad thing for Vernon Brander; and if you don't see all those two-penny geraniums pulled up out of St. Cuthbert's churchyard, and every stone grubbed up, and every brick of that old tower pulled down, before another week's up, my name's not Fred Williams. There, Miss Denison; now, what do you say to that?"

"I say that you have fully justified your low opinion of yourself."

"And I'll justify my low opinion of Vernon Brander. If he's got any secrets buried in those old stones, we'll have them dragged out, and make you jolly well ashamed of your friend."

"Oh, no, you won't do that," said Olivia, who had turned pale to the lips, and grown very

majestic and stern ; " though you have succeeded in making me ashamed of having called you even an acquaintance."

" Perhaps you have a weakness for——"

Before he could finish his sentence, he found himself seized by the shoulders, and saw towering over him a beautiful countenance, so aglow with passionate indignation that it looked like the face of a Fury.

" If you dare to say that word I'll shake you like a rat !" hissed out Olivia, giving him an earnest of her promise with great goodwill.

" Stop ! stop ! unless you—want—to—kill somebody—to be more—like—your—precious—friend," panted Fred, who was not a coward.

Olivia let him go with a movement which sent him spinning among the chickens.

" Well, that's cool," panted he, as he picked up his hat and looked at it ruefully. " You talk about refinement one minute, and the next you treat me in this unladylike way ! "

"Oh, I apologise for my vulgar manners," laughed Olivia, who was already rather ashamed of her outbreak. "I'm only a farmer's daughter, you know."

"Yes, and you couldn't give yourself more airs if you were a duchess. Your father isn't so proud by a long way, I can tell you," he added, with meaning.

Olivia became in an instant very quiet.

"What do you mean?" she asked, sternly.

"Oh, nothing but that he's been in the habit of borrowing money of me for some time; only trifling sums, but still they seemed to come in handy, judging by the way he thanked me."

He was disappointed to see that Olivia took this information without any of the tragic airs he had expected.

"I daresay they did," said she. "We are not too well off, as everybody knows."

The simplicity with which she uttered these words made the young man feel at last rather ashamed of himself.

"Of course, I know he'll pay me back," he said, hastily.

Olivia opened her great proud eyes, full of astonishment and disdain, and said, superbly, "Of course he will!"

"And you don't feel annoyed at the obligation, eh?" asked Fred, rather bewildered.

"I don't see any obligation," said she, quietly.

"Oh, don't you? Well, most people would consider it one."

"How much does he owe you?"

"Oh, only a matter of forty or fifty pounds."

He thought the amount would astonish and distress her; but as, apparently, it failed to do either, he hastened to add—

"Of course, that's a mere nothing; but he let me know, a day or two ago, that he should want a much larger loan, and of course I informed him he could have it for the asking."

She did wince at that; but the manner in

which she resented his impertinence was scarcely to his taste.

“And you think the obligation is on our side?” she said, sweetly, but with a tremor of subdued anger in her voice. “What have you done, except to lend my father a few pounds which you would never have missed, even if you had thrown them into a well, instead of lent them to an honourable man? While he, by accepting the loan, has given you a chance of putting on patronising airs towards a man in every respect your superior.”

“All right—all right! Go on! Vernon Brander shall pay for this!” snarled Fred, at last rendered thoroughly savage by her contempt.

“Vernon Brander will never be the worse for having you for an enemy. I should be sorry for him if you were his friend,” she said, defiantly.

“Oh, all right, I’m glad to hear it,” said Fred, glad at last to beat a retreat, and delivering his parting words at the gate of the poultry-yard, with one foot in the new-laid egg

basket. “Then if anything unpleasant happens to your father or your parson through me, you'll be able to make light of it !”

Olivia felt rather frightened when she saw how discoloured and distorted with rage his little weasel's face had become. But she bore a brave front, and only said, for all reply to his threats—

“Won't you find it more convenient to stand on the ground, Mr. Williams? To walk about among eggs without accident requires a great deal of skill and experience.”

But when, with an impatient exclamation, he left the poultry-yard, Olivia's heart gave way, and she began to reproach herself bitterly for not having kept a bridle upon her tongue. On the other hand, she was glad that her words had provoked the mean little fellow to confess his loans to her father; for she thought she had influence enough with the latter to prevent any more such transactions; and as for the money already owing, means must somehow be found to repay it.

It was late in the afternoon before she was able to start on the way to St. Cuthbert's. She felt, as usual, some self-reproach at the thought that she was acting contrary to her father's wishes; but, as usual, she was too self-willed to give up her own in deference to his. The sun was still glowing on the fields, and pouring its hot rays on the roads, which were parched and cracked for want of rain. The cart-tracks made faint lines in a thick layer of white dust, which the lightest breeze from the hills blew up in clouds, coating the leaves on the hedges and swirling into heaps by the well-worn footpath. The wood that bordered the road for some distance between Rishton and Matherham was as silent as if the birds had all left it; oak and beech and dusty pine looked dry and brown in the glare. It was a long, hot, weary walk; but at last she came near the lonely Vicarage, and slipping down the final few yards of the steep lane in a cloud of dust which was raised by her own feet at each step, Olivia heard the faint sound of voices coming from the house,

and stopped short, fancying she could detect Vernon's voice, and wondering who was with him. But the sounds ceased, and she went slowly on, thinking she had perhaps been mistaken. She entered the garden gate, and walked up the stone pathway, still without hearing anything more, until, suddenly, just as she was within a few paces of the door, she heard a woman's voice, low, but clear and strong, utter these words—

“Remember, you swore it. Ten years ago you swore it to me, and it is still as binding on you as it was then.”

“Why should I forget it?”

Olivia knew that it was Mrs. Brander's voice that answered, in a tone full of contempt and dislike—

“Why, this Denison girl, this——”

Neither she nor Vernon had paid any heed to the footsteps on the stone flags.

Now Olivia hastened to ring the bell sharply, and there was silence immediately.

“How is Mr. Brander to-day?” asked she

of Mrs. Warmington when the housekeeper opened the door.

"He's not much better, and not likely to be while that uncivilised creature from the Antipodes continues to make his abode here, and worry my master, morning, noon, and night," said the housekeeper, tartly.

"Mr. Mitchell? Where is he now?" asked Olivia, eagerly.

"He's out in the churchyard there, poking about among the gravestones. I've been watching him from the window of the little room he sleeps in. I don't know how he got hold of the key. I have a duplicate, for cleaning the church. I don't know myself where my master keeps his."

"I think I'll go and speak to Mr. Mitchell, and come back when Mr. Brander is disengaged."

"Disengaged! He's disengaged now, as far as I know—"

"I think I heard Mrs. Brander's voice as I came up the path."

The housekeeper's lips tightened, and she drew herself up in evident disapproval.

"Indeed! I was not aware she was here."

"Well, I'll be back in about a quarter of an hour, as I should like to see Mr. Brander," said Olivia, hastily.

Mrs. Warmington raised her eyebrows. She was longing to tell Miss Denison that she thought, under the circumstances, it would be more modest to stay away; but she did not dare. So Olivia tripped down the stone path, and was in the churchyard before the housekeeper had had time to make up her mind how much of her suspicions it would be proper to communicate to a young girl.

It was some minutes before Olivia succeeded in finding Ned Mitchell. The sun was setting by this time, and there were dark shadows among the ruined portions of the church. It seemed to her, as she walked between the newly-laid-out flower-beds, with their bright array of geranium, calceolaria, and verbena, that this innovation was out of place, and only showed

up, in a more striking manner, the havoc time and tempest had made among the old stones, just as the mowing of the grass upon them had accentuated the irregular mounds and hillocks which filled the ruined south aisle. Olivia stepped in and out and over the mounds, calling softly, "Mr. Mitchell!" At last, in the corner where the old crypt was, she heard a sound coming, as it were, from the ground under her feet. She stopped and listened, holding her breath. The sounds continued, a soft, muffled "thud, thud," as of some heavy instrument brought again and again down on the earth. She advanced, step by step, always listening, fancying that she felt the ground tremble under her feet at the force of the blows. At last she came close to the place where the rugged steps leading down into the crypt had been blocked up years before. With her senses keenly on the alert, Olivia noticed that some of the stones and earth which blocked the entrance had been recently moved; and prying more closely she found, behind a bramble and a tuft of rank grass, a

small hole, low down in the ground, which looked scarcely large enough for the passage of a man's body. However, this seemed to be the only outlet from the vault, so Olivia sat down on a broken gravestone, and waited.

It seemed to Olivia to be growing quite cold and dark before a scraping and rumbling noise, as of falling stones and earth, drew her attention to the concealed hole in the ground. She got up, and the noise almost ceased.

"It is I, Mr. Mitchell," she said, without being able to see him; "I've been waiting for you."

For answer, Mr. Mitchell's unmistakable gruff voice murmured a string of sullen imprecations, of which, luckily, nothing was distinctly audible. However, he put his head out of the hole, and then proceeded to extricate the whole of his person with such exceeding neatness and cleverness that the hole was scarcely enlarged, and the bramble and grass remained intact. He presented a strange appearance, however, for he was in his shirt-sleeves; a coloured silk handkerchief was bound round his head down to his

eyes; in his right hand he held a common kitchen poker; while he was so covered with mould and dust from head to foot that but for his peculiarly heavy movements and rough voice he would have been unrecognisable.

“ Well, what are you doing here? ” he asked, very ill-humouredly, as he shook himself free from some of the dust he had collected in his subterranean exploration. “ I thought I heard somebody messing about up here. How did you get in? ”

“ In the same way that you did, except that I asked for a key instead of taking one without asking.”

She was alarmed to see, when he had wiped some of the dirt off his face with his handkerchief, that he looked savagely self-satisfied, and quite beyond all reasoning. This was proved clearly by his next words. He nodded his head quietly while she spoke, and then said—

“ All right. That’s so. Now you had better run home, and be careful not to say anything about what you’ve just seen. For I tell you,

little girl, if you do anything to interfere with me and my actions just now, it'll be the worst day's work for your little parson up yonder that ever was done. So now you know."

Olivia shivered, but she did not answer or contradict him. She only said, in a subdued and tremulous voice, "Good-evening, Mr. Mitchell," and walked away towards the gate, stumbling over the chips of stone that lay hidden in the grass, which had been allowed to remain long and rank in this the south side of the graveyard. She unlocked the gate, passed out, and was relocking it when she heard rapid footsteps behind her.

"Give me that key!" said Mrs. Brander's voice, so hoarse, so agitated that Olivia looked round before she could be sure that it was really the vicar's calm, cold wife.

Her large eyes had deep black semicircles under them; her usually firm lips were trembling; her whole appearance showed a disorder, a lack of that dainty preciseness in little things which was so strongly characteristic of her.

"This key!" said Olivia, doubtfully. "Do you know who is in there?"

Mrs. Brander examined the girl from head to foot with passionate mistrust, while at the same time she struggled to regain a calmer manner.

"Who is it?" she asked, with an attempt at an indifferent tone.

"Mr. Mitchell."

The vicar's wife drew back from the gate.

"You mean this? You are not playing me a trick?"

"A trick? No. Why should I?"

There was a pause, during which Mrs. Brander stood looking at her fixedly. As she did not speak, Olivia presently asked—

"Do you still wish to go in?"

Mrs. Brander hesitated, and then drew back with a shudder.

"No," she murmured, scarcely above her breath, "I—I won't go in."

As, however, she did not attempt to go away, Olivia bade her "Good-night," without getting any answer, and went up the lane towards the

house. She did not wish to call at the Vicarage now ; she wanted first to have time to think over what she had seen and heard in the churchyard, as well as her interview with Mrs. Brander. A new idea, which promised to throw light on the whole mystery, had come into her mind. But there was the key to be returned to Mrs. Warmington. After a moment's thought, she decided that she would leave it at the back door, and thus escape the risk of a meeting with Vernon.

But when she had reached the gate of the yard behind the house, she heard Vernon's voice calling her.

“ Miss Denison, Miss Denison, wait one moment ! ”

He had caught sight of her from a side window, and in another minute he had come down to her.

“ Why did you come round this way ? ” he asked, taking her hand in one of his, which was hot, and dry, and feverish.

“ I—I have the key of the churchyard to return to Mrs. Warmington.”

"And you wanted to escape the chance of seeing me. But I was watching for you, you know," said he, looking at her tenderly. Then he suddenly changed his manner. "I thought you would come and see me to-day," he said. "It would be like your usual kindness when any one is ill."

"I did call and inquire," said Olivia, demurely. "But Mrs. Brander was with you."

Vernon looked at her earnestly.

"Ah!" he exclaimed; "then I know when you came. I heard your footsteps." Then he looked at her curiously, and asked, "Didn't you hear voices? Didn't you hear us talking?"

"Yes," answered Olivia, simply. "And I heard something of what you were saying."

"You will tell me what you heard?"

Olivia answered, looking down—

"I heard her remind you to keep an oath that you had made to her, and I heard her mention—me!"

"And didn't you want to know what she meant?"

"I suppose I did."

"And will you be content not to know?"

"Perhaps I shall. For I think I have guessed something of the truth already."

Vernon's eyes glowed with passionate yearning as they met hers.

"Impossible!" said he, below his breath. "And yet—you women have such quick perception. If it is true that you know," he went on, in a firmer and sterner voice, "I shall never dare to speak to you again."

Olivia was trembling with excitement. It was not true that she was mistress of the secret, but there was a dim intuition in her mind which bewildered, sometimes almost maddened her. She did not attempt to answer Vernon Brander; but drawing sharply away from him the hand he still held, she abruptly wished him "Good-night," and putting the church keys on the wall beside him, ran away up the lane as fast as her active feet could carry her.

When Olivia reached home she was greeted by severe silence on the part of her step-mother ; while her father, who was usually so careful to try to make amends for any unkindness of his wife's by little unobtrusive attentions, carefully avoided her. The girl learned the reason of this treatment by remarks which Mrs. Denison, apropos of nothing, addressed from time to time to the children, warning them not to spoil their clothes, as they were the last they would have ; telling them not to disturb their father, as he was writing to a gentleman to whom he owed money, asking for time in which to repay it ; and finally admonishing them to be courteous to Olivia, as she could have the place sold up in a moment by insulting her father's creditors : from which Olivia gathered that Fred Williams had already vented his spite on her father, and thereby prepared a most uncomfortable domestic life for her for some time to come.

She affected to take no notice of this treatment, however, and did not even go in search of her father, thinking it would be better to let the

first effects both of Fred's and of his wife's ill-temper pass off before she spoke to him on the subject of the former's addresses.

Telling Lucy to bring her supper up to her rooms, Olivia left the inharmonious family circle without bidding good-night to any one, and shut herself up in the east wing, where she could always draw the bolt of the outer door and be free from molestation. This she did, and being in a restless and excited state of mind, passed the next two hours in wandering from one room to the other, considering the mystery of Nellie Mitchell's disappearance by the light of all the facts which, one by one, had recently come to her knowledge. She had become so accustomed to these rooms that it was only now and then that she remembered their connection with the murdered girl. To-night, however, the recollection startled her at every turn she took in her walks up and down. She seemed again to see the bedroom as it had looked on her first entrance, nearly six months ago, the rat scurrying down the curtains, the carpet lying in damp

strings upon the floor, the mouldy books, and the dust lying thickly on chairs and mantelpiece. Everything had been changed since then ; fresh hangings put to the bed ; bright cretonne coverings to the old furniture ; a new carpet, soft and warm, had replaced the damp rags. But on this particular evening her imagination seemed stronger than reality ; as she walked from the one room to the other, she pictured to herself always that the chamber she was not in at the moment was in the state in which she had first seen it.

These fancies grew so strong that they drove more serious thoughts out of her head ; just when she wanted to be able to analyse the ideas which the day's occurrences had suggested, she had lost all power of thinking connectedly ; nothing but bewildering recollections of the words she had heard and the scenes she had witnessed could be got to occupy her excited mind.

She ran at last to one of her bedroom windows, threw it open, and looked out. It was

dark now, for it was past nine o'clock, and the evening had turned wet. A light, drizzling summer rain was falling, and the sky was heavy with clouds. The outlook was so dreary that after a few minutes she shut the window, shivering, lit the candles, and tried to read. But she was in such a nervous state that she uttered a little scream when Lucy, bringing her supper, knocked at the outer door. Very much disgusted with herself for this display of feminine weakness, she would not even allow Lucy, who loved to linger about when she had any little service to perform for "Miss Olivia," to stay for a few minutes' chat. When the supper had been laid on the table in the outer room, and the bright little maid had run downstairs, Olivia did not, as usual, lock the outer door after her. She felt so unaccountably lonely and restless that she went into the little passage outside her two rooms, and set the outer door open, so as to feel that her connection with the rest of the human life in the house was not altogether severed. She even walked to the end of the corridor and

glanced out through the large square window at the end, listening all the while for some sounds of the household life downstairs. But in this east wing very little could be heard, and this evening everything seemed to Olivia to be unusually quiet.

The corridor window looked out over fields, showing the farm garden, with its fruit trees and vegetable beds on the right, and barns and various other outbuildings on the left. Right underneath was a neglected patch of land—a corner of the garden not considered worth cultivation.

Lying among the rank grass were an old ladder and a pile of boards, which had been there when the Denisons took the farm, and had remained undisturbed ever since. It suddenly occurred to Olivia, for the first time, how alarmingly easy it would be for an evilly-disposed person to place the ladder against the wall, and to effect an entrance through the window, the fastening of which she noticed was broken, and had evidently been so a long time. Not that

such a thing was likely to happen, burglaries being unheard-of things in this neighbourhood. Still, the idea got such firm hold of her excited fancy, that, two hours later, when all the household had retired to rest, she came out of her apartments in her dressing-gown to give a final glance outside, and to make sure that her absurd fears were as groundless as she told herself they were.

Opening the window and putting her head out into the drizzling rain, Olivia saw, in the gloom of the misty night, a dark object creeping stealthily along outside the garden wall. Just as it reached that part of the wall which was immediately opposite the window, a watery gleam of moonlight showed through the clouds, and enabled her to see that the object was a man. The next moment she saw him climb over into the garden beneath. Still keeping close to the wall, he crept rapidly along until he was close under the window. Holding her breath, Olivia watched him as he stooped and lifted the ladder from the ground. Her blood

suddenly seemed to rush to her brain, and then to trickle slowly back through her veins as cold as ice.

For she recognised him !

CHAPTER XXIV.

A NOCTURNAL INTRUDER.

LIKE all persons of strong nature, Olivia Denison grew bolder as danger came nearer. When she recognised the man in the garden, underneath the corridor window, it did not occur to her to call for help ; but all her energies were instantly concentrated on learning the meaning of this intrusion. She was sure that she had not been seen. As noiselessly as she could she shut the window, and retreated into the private passage which led to her own apartments. There she waited, peeping cautiously out under cover of the black shadows of the corridor, into which the faint moonlight could not penetrate.

She heard the grinding sound made by the ladder as it was set against the wall, and presently she saw a man's head appear just above the ledge outside. He raised his hand,

gave three taps on the glass, and disappeared. A minute later he mounted a step higher than before, and tapped again. Then, with scarcely an instant's more delay, he pushed up the window slowly and noiselessly, and, as soon as it was wide enough, put one leg over the sill and stood in the corridor.

Olivia, brave as she was by nature, was transfixed with alarm. What did he want with her? What shocking confession, what horrible entreaties, had he come to make to her like this, in the middle of the night? If she could have shrieked aloud, if she could have run out and alarmed the household, she would have done so now. But horror had paralysed her. The voice she tried to use gave only a hoarse, almost inaudible rattle. Her limbs were rigid; her breath came and went in gasps, like that of a person dying of asthma. She could only stand and stare at the advancing figure, hoping desperately that the first words he uttered would break this spell, and restore her to herself. Why did he choose the night-time to

come and make her the victim of his guilty confidences? Were they too ghastly to make by day? That this man was the murderer of Nellie Mitchell she could not now doubt; the demeanour of his every-day life was utterly changed; there was guilt expressed in every furtive movement. All her respect and liking were transformed into loathing and fear; she almost crouched against the wall as he approached.

He reached the entrance to the corridor, and paused. If she could only keep still enough for him to pass her! Then she could escape into the main building of the house, and have time to think what she should do. But he stopped short and stretched out his hand to knock at the door. In the darkness he could not see that it was open. But how, Olivia suddenly asked herself, did he know there was a door there at all? Although he moved slowly, too, it was with the manner of a man who knew his way about the place. Part of the truth flashed suddenly into her mind: he had been there

before. By this time he had discovered that the door was open. Passing into the corridor, he shut the door, turned the key, and put it in his pocket. As he did so he touched Olivia, but did not appear to know it. Now thoroughly alarmed, she flew along the passage into her bedroom, and was in time to lock the door before she heard his footsteps in the outer apartment. There was no lock to the door between the two rooms. No one was likely to hear her if she shrieked at one of the windows. Before many minutes were over she felt that she should have to face him.

She flew across the bedroom floor to blow out the candle, thinking that in the darkness she would have a better chance of escape. As she did so she stumbled against a chair, which fell down with a loud noise. A moment later there was a knock at the inner door. The girl's heart stood still. She remained motionless, and gave no answer. The knock was repeated. Still she was silent. A third time came the knock, and then a low, hoarse whisper, of one

word only, startled her, and came as a revelation :—

“ Nellie ! ”

This was the manner in which, years ago, he had visited the girl whose love had ended by wearying him so fatally. By what means he had forgotten the intervening years she did not know, but Olivia recognised at once that it was not she of whom he was in search. The knowledge restored in a moment all her courage. If, as she supposed, fear of discovery had turned his brain, his was a madness with which she felt she could cope. After only one moment's hesitation, she snatched up one of the candles, and unlocking the door she had secured, passed through the passage into the adjoining room.

“ Mr. Brander ! ” said she, in a voice which scarcely trembled.

She had to repeat her words three or four times before he moved from the other door. At last he turned very slowly, and Olivia, raising the candle high, looked curiously, and not wholly without fear, into his face.

His eyes were closed; his breathing was heavy. He was asleep!

There flashed through her mind the remembrance of what the Vicar of Rishton had said about somnambulism, and the strange instances of it which had occurred in his family. It was clear to her that the excitement occasioned by Ned Mitchell's obstinate determination had preyed upon the mind of the murderer, and led him at last to perform in sleep an action which had been an habitual one with him eleven years before.

In spite of the horror of this weird discovery, Olivia's fears disappeared at once. She thought she might, without waking him, persuade him to go back as he had come. If he did wake, she knew he would not hurt her. She began in a low, intentionally monotonous voice—

"I think you had better go back to-night. It is getting very late; it is almost daylight."

As before, she had to repeat her words before he grasped the sense of them.

Then he repeated in a whisper, and as if there were something soothing in the sound of her voice—

“Go back. Yes, go back.”

“I'll give you a light. Come along,” she went on, coaxingly.

And without a moment's delay she led the way out into the passage. Much to her relief, he followed, at the same slow, heavy pace.

“Now,” she said, when they had reached the outer door, “give me the key, please.”

He felt in his pocket obediently, and produced the key, which she, overjoyed, almost snatched from his hand. The noise she made in her excitement, as she opened the door, seemed to disturb him, for he began to move restlessly, like a person on the point of waking. Once in the corridor, however, Olivia was bold; she passed her hands several times slowly down his arms, murmuring in a low, soothing tone, injunctions to him to get home quickly. This treatment succeeded perfectly. His manner lost its momentary restlessness, and it was in the

same stolid way as he came that he got out on the ladder, descended, replaced the ladder in the long grass, and climbed over the wall.

Olivia watched his retreating figure as long as it was in sight, and then, feeling sick and cold, slunk back into her rooms, not forgetting to lock the outer door of the passage safely behind her. Like most women, however brave, when they have been through an exciting crisis, she felt exhausted, limp, almost hysterical. She staggered as she entered her bedroom, and it was with a reeling brain that she walked up and down, up and down, unable to sleep, unable even to rest. She knew the mystery now, and she felt that the knowledge was almost more than she could bear.

Next morning her appearance, when she came down late to breakfast, was so much affected by the awful night she had passed that even the children wondered what was the matter with her. Mr. Denison, believing it to be the result of his avoidance of her the evening before, was cut to the heart with remorse; while his

wife, alarmed at the change in the girl, altered her tone, and did her best to be kind to her. Olivia could not eat. Her cheeks were almost livid; her great eyes seemed to fill her face ; the hand she held out to be shaken was cold, clammy, and trembling. Her amiable little half-sister Beatrix saw an opening for a disagreeable remark, and made use of it.

“ Mr. Williams wouldn’t say you were pretty if he could see you now,” said she. “ Would he, mamma ? ”

Like most children, she was quick enough to detect how inharmonious were the relations between her mother and her step-sister. She was surprised to find, however, that for once she received no sympathy from the quarter whence she expected it.

“ Be quiet, Beatrix, and don’t be rude,” said Mrs. Denison, sharply, with a glance at Olivia, on whom she thought that the reference to the supposed cause of her distress would have some sudden and violent effect.

“ Can’t you keep those children in better

order, Marian?" asked Mr. Denison, peevishly.
"Their rudeness is getting quite intolerable."

However, Olivia scarcely heard this little discussion, and was in no way moved by it. But when the talk turned to the proposed restoration of St. Cuthbert's, and from that to the persons interested in it, she grew suddenly very still, and sat looking down at her plate, listening to each word with fear of what the next would be.

"I wonder how the vicar likes to see his wife about so constantly with another man, if it is his own brother," said Mrs. Denison, who, in spite of her experience as a governess, was one of those people who think it doesn't matter what subjects you discuss before children, because "they don't understand." "I'm sure the last week or so I've scarcely ever seen one without the other."

"Well, now, do you know, I thought it was awfully good-natured of her. You know the stories that have been flying about lately. I'm sure I don't pretend to say whether there's any

truth in them or not; still, they have been flying about."

"And not without some ground, you may depend," said Mrs. Denison, tartly.

While avoiding the subject which she supposed to be the cause of Olivia's present distress, her step-mother could not resist the opportunity of giving that headstrong young lady a few gentle thrusts on the subject of her "fancy for murderers." Mr. Denison glanced from his wife to his daughter, who, by putting strong constraint on herself, appeared not to notice what was being said.

"Well, and as she must know the rights of the story, it seems to me all the kinder in Mrs. Brander to take any notice of him now, when he's under a cloud, as it were."

Mrs. Denison uttered a little sound significant of doubt and scorn.

"It is to be hoped that everybody else will put as kind an interpretation upon her conduct," she said drily. "Only last Tuesday I met them as I walked back from the Towers. They were

sitting in that little cart sort of thing Mrs. Brander drives—not at all the right kind of turn-out for a clergyman's wife, in my opinion—and talking together so—well, so confidentially—that they took no notice of me whatever."

" Didn't see you, of course," said Mr. Denison, shortly.

" It may have been that, certainly," assented his wife, incredulously. " Or it may be that they are not too much lost to shame to avoid the eye of a lady whom they respect when they feel they are not behaving quite correctly."

" Rubbish!" said Mr. Denison, shortly.

It was so seldom that the so-called head of the house ventured so near to an expression of adverse opinion that there was a short silence, which his wife broke in a dangerously dignified manner.

" Perhaps," she began, with strong emphasis, " when the whole truth comes to light concerning his relations with other ladies, my opinion

on the matter will not be considered ‘rubbish’ after all.”

Reginald, with the delightful relish of an innocent child for conversation not intended for his ears, had left off making patterns on the tablecloth with the mustard spoon, in order to listen and watch with his mouth open. He now broke in with a happy sense that he was making mischief.

“Oh, look, mamma, what a funny colour Olivia’s face has gone!” cried he, pointing to her with the mustard spoon.

The girl got up and left the room. Her father, who could not bear to see any one unhappy, was miserable at the thought that he himself was partly the cause of his darling daughter’s grief.

“Olivia, my dear child, come down—come here,” he called after her from the hall as she fled upstairs.

She never could resist any appeal from him, so she crept down again, unwillingly enough.

"Oh, that woman, that woman! Papa, I must go away. I can't live with her," she whispered as she laid her head on his shoulder and received his caress and incoherent attempts at comfort.

"Well, dear, what can I do?" he whispered, apologetically, back. "You see, you were such a little thing when your mother died, and I hate a household without a woman in it, so that even——"

"Even an objectionable woman is better than none," suggested Olivia, mischievously.

"Oh, no, my dear, I didn't say that," whispered he, hurriedly.

"No, papa, you don't dare," said Olivia, with a touch of her old archness. "I really think that when a man with children marries a second time, he ought to drown the first lot in mercy to them."

Poor Mr. Denison looked down at her ruefully.

"My dear, I hope you didn't mean that," was all he ventured to say.

"Yes, I did."

Here Mr. Denison perceived an opening for a suggestion which his wife, of late, had been constantly urging him to make. Not being quite sure how his daughter would take it, he hurried it out in a shame-faced manner without looking at her—

"Since you don't get on very well together, I wonder you don't take the chance of getting a nice home of your own; you know you could if you liked."

"What, by wearing little Freddy Williams for ever on my watch-chain?" cried Olivia, turning off the suggestion as a joke to avoid paining her father by expressing the disgust she felt.

"Well, my child, you know I shouldn't press upon you anything that wouldn't make you happy; but if you wait for a husband worthy of you, you'll die an old maid."

"And if you'll go on living till you're about a hundred and five to keep me company, papa, I'll be the oldest maid in England with pleasure,"

said she, affectionately, as she kissed his cheek and ran away upstairs.

She had some work to do this morning—work for which she must drive all thought of last night's adventure out of her head. As soon as she reached her own room she unlocked the drawer in which she kept her trinkets, and spreading them out before her on the dressing-table, she mentally passed them in review to decide which were the most likely to be saleable. Not a bad collection for a young girl, they formed ; though Olivia, ignorant as she was about the value of jewellery, thought how poor they looked from the point of view at which she was now considering them. A pair of turquoise and pearl earrings and brooch to match, a heavy gold bracelet, a set of garnets and pearls of quaint old-fashioned design, a handsome silver châtelaine watch, a quantity of silver bangles, a few very modest-looking rings, a diamond arrow brooch, and a massive gold necklace. Everything but the arrow, which had been a present from her father on her eighteenth

birthday, looked, in a strictly commercial light, clumsy or out of date. The arrow must be sacrificed, she told herself with a sigh; so must the gold necklet and bracelet, which she rightly judged to be next in value. If she could only sell these things, and get ten or twelve pounds for them, she could pay off a fair instalment of her father's debt to Fred Williams immediately, and she must trust to luck and her own determination for the rest. So she made a parcel of the trinkets she had chosen, and, at the last moment, packed also the turquoise and pearl set; then, dressing hastily, she slipped out of the house, and started at a rapid pace on her way to Matherham.

Before she reached the high-road, however, she was met by Fred Williams, who was sauntering about, pipe in mouth, at the point where the roads met, on the chance of meeting her. He surveyed her with a sidelong look of unwilling admiration.

"Good-morning, Miss Denison," he said, curtly, pulling off his cap in a sort of grudging

manner. "I suppose you have nothing fresh to say to me this morning?"

"Not at present, though I may have by-and-by," said she, lightly.

"Oh, well, er—do you know whether your father is likely to be about this morning? I want to see him on business."

Olivia looked at him with great contempt from under her sweeping black eyelashes.

"He is about, of course; but I don't think you need trouble yourself to see him, for I have a message to you from him. It is this: the first instalment of the money he owes you will be paid to-day, and the remainder very shortly. And he is very sorry to have put you to any inconvenience by accepting the loan."

With which speech, and a low bow, Olivia left Mr. Williams to the enjoyment of his own society.

Then on she sped towards Matherham, not by way of the wood and St. Cuthbert's, but by the shorter road that went past the Towers. A great bare building it was, standing ostentatiously

on very high ground, with a spire here, a minaret there, and various irregular erections springing up from the roof to make good its name. Olivia laughed to herself, and wished the lady who might ultimately obtain the hand of her mean-spirited admirer joy of her bargain. She was not unhappy ; the fearful nature of her discovery of the night before had shaken her out of the depression from which she had lately been suffering. She was excited, full of indignation and of energy ; her head full of wild surmises, of fears connected with the approaching crisis. As if trying to keep pace with her fantastic thoughts, her feet seemed to fly along the ground. The few persons she passed stared at or curtseyed to her without any acknowledgment ; she saw no one but the people in her thoughts.

Suddenly she was roused out of her wild reverie by hearing her own name called in sharp tones. She looked down from the high pathway alongside the hedge into the road, which at this point was some five feet below. There she saw the Vicarage pony carriage, containing Mrs.

Brander, who was driving, with Vernon sitting by her side. It was the lady who had called to Olivia. Having pulled up the ponies to the side of the road, she now beckoned to the girl in an impatient, imperious manner to come down.

"Good-morning," said Olivia, coldly, without attempting to leave the pathway. Her cheeks had grown in an instant deadly white on seeing who was the lady's companion; but she did not glance at him. "I can't stop this morning, Mrs. Brander; I'm in a great hurry," she said, in an unsteady voice, while her heart beat violently; and she felt that if the interview lasted a minute longer, she should not be able to stand without support.

"But I have something important to say to you—very important. I really must beg you to give me a moment; and, if you like, I will drive you into Matherham myself."

"No, thank you," said Olivia, hastily.

"One minute, then, I beg, Miss Denison."

The imperious lady's voice had suddenly

broken and become imploring. Olivia, with downcast eyes, and feet that tottered under her, found a convenient place for a descent into the road, and the next minute stood by the pony carriage, on the side where Mrs. Brander was sitting. She neither looked up nor spoke, but left the opening of the conversation to the vicar's wife, whose hands, as she held the reins, shook with a nervousness altogether unusual with her. With strange diffidence, too, Mrs. Brander hesitated before she spoke.

" You are walking into Matherham ? " she asked, at last.

" Yes, Mrs. Brander."

" You are sure you won't let me drive you in ? "

" Quite sure, thank you."

" Vernon, you know, would get down ; he'd rather walk, I'm certain."

Olivia's face became suddenly crimson.

" I couldn't think of turning Mr. Brander out," she said, coldly.

"I should be delighted," murmured Vernon in a low tone.

In spite of all her efforts to retain her self-command, Olivia shivered at the sound of his voice. She felt, although she never once looked at the face of either, that both the man and the woman were watching her intently. They had some suspicion of the knowledge she had so strangely obtained, she was sure. There was a pause, and then Mrs. Brander spoke again.

"You don't look so well as usual this morning, Miss Denison," she said, not quite able to keep curiosity and anxiety out of her tone. "You are quite pale. We miss your lovely roses."

"I have had a bad night," said Olivia, shortly, and with a sudden determination that it would be better to let them know all she had discovered.

The effort Mrs. Brander made to retain her usual calmness and coldness was piteous to see. Her beautiful features quivered; her great black eyes were dilated with apprehension.

"A bad night?" she repeated, inquiringly.

"Yes. I was frightened. A man got into my sitting-room."

Neither of her hearers made any but the faintest attempt to affect astonishment.

"It must have alarmed you horribly," said Mrs. Brander with blanched lips. "Did you call any one?"

"No."

Over the face of the vicar's wife came an expression of great relief.

"Have you told any one?"

"This is the first time I have mentioned it."

There was a pause.

"Have you any idea—who—the man—was?"

"I recognised him at once, before he got in at the window. He spoke to me, but he did not know who I was. He was asleep."

"He spoke to you?"

"Yes. He addressed me as 'Nellie.' "

Olivia had dropped her eyes, but she heard

Mrs. Brander's breath coming quickly, as if she was choking. The girl put her hand out impulsively on the arm of the elder lady, and whispered, without looking up—

“ You made me tell you. And, after all, what does it matter? I think you know.”

She felt her hand seized with a convulsive pressure.

“ You will say nothing? ” Then Mrs. Brander snatched her hand away. “ No, no ; it is asking too much, of course. And perhaps, after all, it would be of no use.”

“ At any rate, Mrs. Brander, nobody but you will ever hear the story from me.”

She ignored Vernon, as she had ignored him throughout the whole of the interview. Mrs. Brander drew a laboured sigh.

“ I trust you,” she said in a hoarse voice. “ A woman can keep a secret as well as a man, I know.”

“ Oh, yes,” said Olivia, simply. “ Now you will let me go, will you not? ”

She was frank, honest; but she was not

cordial ; scarcely even kind. When Mrs. Brander pressed her hand again, however, she returned the pressure with a firm grasp. Then, still without a glance at Vernon, she bowed and wished the vicar's wife "Good-morning," and, turning, resumed her walk towards Matherham. She had not gone many yards before she quickened her pace still more, hearing footsteps she recognised behind, and then beside her.

It was Vernon Brander.

For some time he walked on in silence by her side, not daring to address her. At last he said, humbly, imploringly—

"Won't you speak to me?"

No answer.

"Have you forgotten all you once said to me about friendship?"

"No," she answered, in a frightened, constrained voice, still without looking at him.

"Remember, what you saw last night was no worse than what you already believed."

"Yes, it was!" panted Olivia. "It was worse: much worse—to see—to hear. It was something I shall never forget. But don't let us speak of it."

"But is it to make this difference, that you will never speak to me again?"

"It is to make no difference; you heard me say so. You wish it; she wishes it. I have promised."

"I take you at your word. If you had discovered nothing, you would have let me go into Matherham with you, and you would have told me the object of your going. Will you now?"

"Yes, if you like, Mr. Brander." In spite of herself, her tone was more formal than usual. "I am going to get some money to repay a loan from that wretched little Fred Williams."

"To your father, of course. And I suppose," he added, glancing at the little parcel she carried in her hand, "you are going to sell some trinkets of your own to do so."

"To help to do so," answered Olivia, with a blush and a look of surprise at his perspicacity. "The whole sum is much more than anything of mine could fetch."

"Will you tell me how much?"

"Fifty pounds!"

"And will you, as a pledge of what you said—that you will forget everything—do for me what, I know, you would not do for any other man?"

"What is that?"

"Let me lend you the money. I spend nothing. I have a considerable sum saved, and it will do me a pleasure—such a pleasure!" he added, earnestly, below his breath. "It would be a mark of confidence which would prove to me, whatever I may have done wrong—and my conscience is not too clear, I know you know—prove to me that you have a little compassion, a little kindness, for me still."

Without answering in words, Olivia, who was trembling violently, took his hand, pressed

it quickly for one moment in hers, and let it drop hastily, as if she had been too bold.

Then, without the exchange of a single word more, they walked through the narrow, hilly streets of Matherham, which they had now reached, until they came to the bank where Vernon kept an account. Olivia walked on while he went into the building; in a very few minutes he overtook her and put an envelope into her hand. She did not thank him; he did not give her time.

"I am very grateful," he said simply; "I—I can't say any more now. Good-bye."

Olivia looked up and spoke with a sob in her voice.

"Good-bye," she said.

Then they looked into each other's eyes with the long, sad look of a farewell, and she was not surprised at his next words.

"I daresay," he said, in a hoarse voice, "that I shall be going away from here before long; I daresay I shall have to—when the tower is built," he added in a whisper, looking down.

"No, don't say anything—I couldn't bear it."

But Olivia, though she tried, could utter no word. She wrung his hand, and looked straight into his face with an expression of passionate sympathy and despair. Then, without another word, they parted.

CHAPTER XXV.

A DISCOVERY AT ST. CUTHBERT'S.

OLIVIA hurried back towards the farm with the little packet in her hand which was to release her father from his hateful indebtedness to Fred Williams. It was true, it rendered her herself indebted to somebody else ; but, with a woman's perversity, she preferred the greater evil to the less. It was rather an awkward matter, however, to acquaint her father with what she had done, especially as she found him in the lowest depths of despondency.

“Don’t speak to me, my dear—don’t speak to me,” was his greeting to his daughter when she pounced upon him, with a light-hearted laugh, from behind the hedge of one of his own cornfields.

He was contemplating the ripening crop with a most rueful face.

"Why not, papa? Perhaps I may have some good news for you."

"Good news! Oh, no," he answered, dolefully, shaking his head. "It must be for somebody else if you have any good news. So go away, or I may be cross; and I don't want to speak crossly to you, my darling."

There was not much fear of such a thing, evidently; for when she persisted in coming to him, and giving him a hearty kiss, the wrinkles in his forehead began immediately to clear away.

"It's all your fault, you minx," said he, looking affectionately at the girl's bonny face. "You've turned the heads of all the lads about here, and then it's your poor old father that they 'wreak their vengeance on,' as the melodramas say."

"Why, papa," said the girl, blushing, "who's been teasing you now? Produce him, and let me wither him up with a glance."

"Well, the first thing I hear this morning is that the old brute John Oldshaw has been making all sorts of mischief about me to Lord

Stannington's agent—says I'm ruining the land, and all that; and it's all because he's angry at poor Mat's humble admiration for you, I know. He says I'm not fit to be a farmer. Now what do you think of that?"

The enormity of this allegation made Mr. Denison quite unable to proceed. But Olivia shook her head and laughed.

"I think, papa, that if all Mr. Oldshaw's statements were as veracious as that, he would be a much honester man than he is."

"Why, what do you mean, child?"

"That if the whole world had been thoroughly scoured to find the one man most unsuitable for the occupation of farming, they could not have done better than light on you."

"Olivia, I'm surprised at you!" said her father, assuming a tone of great dignity, mingled with indignation.

"Ah, you may well be surprised to find a girl with as much common sense as a man," retorted she, merrily; for since her return from

Matherham her spirits had risen in an extraordinary manner. "Now, papa, look at John Oldshaw. He's a perfect type of a successful farmer. And he's mean, and he's vulgar, and he's industrious, and he's economical; while you—*pardon me*—are none of those things. I don't say that all good farmers are like John Oldshaw, but I'm certain none of them are a bit like you. And if he can persuade you that you'll never do anything at farming but lose your money, and catch cold looking at oats that won't ripen and turnips that won't come up, he'll do you a very great service."

"But, my dear," remonstrated her father, not quite certain whether to be amused or offended by her wicked plain-speaking, "you don't understand these things; women never do. Of course, it's not their province, and we don't expect it of them." The poor old fellow's tone grew more confident when he got into these mild platitudes. "John Oldshaw has always shown himself jealous of me: firstly, because I'm a gentleman; and, secondly, because

I conduct my farming on different principles from his."

"Yes, papa," said Olivia, demurely, "on very different principles. He gets large crops, and you get small ones. And John Oldshaw wants to turn you out, and apply his principles to your land. And I wish you would let him."

Mr. Denison sighed. He could not quite hide from himself that there were grains of truth and good sense in his daughter's suggestions; but the secret admission made him impatient and irritable.

"Of course," he said, turning upon her, "I am not likely to get on here or anywhere while my people insult the friends who would help me to tide over the bad time."

"Do you mean that I have insulted Fred Williams, papa?" asked Olivia, who was too straightforward to allow the talk to be carried on by innuendoes.

"Well, and what if I do?" asked Mr. Denison, taken aback; for he was one of those

persons who will walk round about a fact for ever without facing it.

"Has the little reptile been worrying you about the money he lent you?"

"Reptile!" echoed Mr. Denison, trying to evade the question. "That is a strong word for a young lady to use, my dear. Not but what I have been disappointed in that young fellow. He seemed such a generous, open-hearted lad that, I own, he induced me to break my rule, and allow him to accommodate me in a little difficulty I was in——"

"And are you out of the difficulty, papa?"

"Well, my dear, I am, in a sense, out of that one. But difficulties have such a way of clinging together; where they've been once, they come again."

"And this wretched creature has been worrying you, then?"

"Well, he spoke to me about you in such a way that I was mad with myself for having allowed him to oblige me."

"I think I can free you from that obligation,

papa," said she, gently. "Only you mustn't ask where the money came from."

"What?" cried he in astonishment. "My dear child, you are dreaming. I owe him fifty pounds."

"Look here."

She opened her little packet, and unfolded before him ten five-pound notes.

"But, Olivia, I can't take these from you without knowing how you got them," said her father, trying to assume a rather severe paternal air.

"It's very simple; I went into Matherham, followed a rich-looking old gentleman into a quiet street, knocked him down, and robbed him," she answered, laughing. "But you needn't have any qualms of conscience about the proceeds of the deed, for I'm going to hand them over to Fred Williams myself, with a message from you—which I shall make up."

"But, Olivia, I really cannot permit——"

"It's too late now; the power of permission is denied you. But, remember, when you next

meet that miserable little goose, you can hold up your head and snap your fingers at him, for there will be no obligation between you any longer."

She nodded good-bye to him very brightly, checked his expostulations with a kiss, and ran off over the fields in the direction of the Towers ; for Olivia was feverishly anxious to pay off the debt, and she had little doubt that she would find Fred lounging on his father's lawn, softening what brains he had by the help of some fluid or other, and a strong cigar. She met him, however, before she reached the gate of the Towers. He had just come from Matherham in a hansom, and was quarrelling with the cab-man about his fare ; but when he caught sight of Olivia he changed his tone, and threw the man a handful of silver with an ostentatious air. Then he came up to her with a manner full of exaggerated respect, and an expression of face in which the girl instantly detected a good deal of malice.

"Delighted to see you, Miss Denison ; it

isn't often you do us the honour of a visit up here. You wish to see my sister, I suppose."

"No, I came to see you, and I won't detain you long. I am commissioned by my father to bring you the money you so kindly lent him, and to say how deeply obliged he is for the graceful generosity you have shown him in this matter."

Fred Williams was annoyed, but he did not seem surprised.

"Oh, all right," he said, gruffly. "You needn't sneer. Your guv'nor was precious glad to take it at the time: that's all I know. And you haven't got me on toast, as you think; for I saw you pass here this morning, and I followed you into Matherham, and I know what you did there," he added, triumphantly.

"Nothing that I am ashamed of," said the girl, quietly.

"Oh no, you've too much cheek to be ashamed of anything. You've paid me back to-day, and I'll pay you back to-morrow; for to-morrow the workmen begin to dig in St.

Cuthbert's churchyard, and if they should come across anything that'll upset your friend's apple-cart, remember you had the chance to stop it. And perhaps you won't feel so proud then of having got clear of debt to me by running into debt with a murderer—yes, a murderer, Miss High-and-Mighty," he continued, with a little dance of delight on the garden path. "And if you don't feel jolly well ashamed of yourself and your friend by about this time next week, why, I'm a polished gentleman, that I am!"

" You couldn't say anything stronger than that, Mr. Williams," said Olivia, ingenuously. " I suppose I shall have the pleasure of meeting you to-morrow at St. Cuthbert's. Good-morning."

And, quite unaffected by his threats, she bowed to him with great ceremony, and tripped away down the road as if greatly pleased with her interview.

But Olivia was not at ease; she only appeared so because she was excited to the pitch of recklessness. As the day drew on, and the

time for the commencement of the excavations at St. Cuthbert's grew nearer, she became restless, depressed, and so irritable that she had to pass the time either out of doors or in her own rooms, to avoid the domestic friction which she felt that to-day she could not bear. Next morning she awoke with a deadening sense of being on the brink of some great danger. At the breakfast-table, at which she duly appeared to avoid giving unnecessary alarm to her father, her looks again provoked much comment, which she bore as patiently as she could, being particularly anxious not to encourage a discussion which might lead to interference with a project she had in view. She was so impatient to leave the house that every trifling delay seemed to her to be part of a conspiracy to keep her indoors. When her usual household duties were disposed of, when Mrs. Denison's request that she would make up a parcel for the dyer's had been complied with, she crept up-stairs with a heart full of anxiety, dressed, slipped out of the house, and sped away in the direction of St. Cuthbert's.

For all her haste, she could not reach the churchyard much before twelve o'clock, when the workmen, their morning's labour almost over, were slackening their efforts in anticipation of the dinner-hour. Already their invasion had entirely changed the aspect of the churchyard. Piles of scaffolding-poles, ladders, and boards, lay just inside the walls. Planks, placed across the broken gravestones, formed bridges for the passage of wheelbarrows to and from the scene of operations. This, Olivia saw, was the ground at the foot of the tower, extending to the crypt, the entrance to which had been freed from the stones and bricks which had blocked it up for so long. The men seemed to be at work in all directions: some were erecting a scaffolding against the old tower, the upper part of which was to be taken down; some carting away stones and rubbish from the east end; some removing that corner of the roof of the south aisle which, in a crumbling and dangerous condition, still remained. But it was upon the corner where the old crypt was that Olivia's attention at once

fixed. For here, listening perfunctorily with one ear to old Mr. Williams, who had a self-made man's veneration for his own utterances, and keeping a sharp look-out upon two workmen whose labours within the crypt he was superintending, was Ned Mitchell.

Nothing had happened so far, Olivia easily guessed; no discoveries had been made; no alarm had been given. But, to her fancy, there hung over the whole place the hush of expectancy: the workmen scarcely spoke to each other, the onlookers seemed to hold their breath. Another feature of the scene was that these onlookers each seemed to have come by stealth, and to wish to remain unnoticed by the rest. Olivia herself, for instance, remained outside the churchyard wall, seeing only so much of the operations as could be observed from the highest part of the rough and broken ground. Then, lurking behind the hedge on the opposite side of the lane, was the lame tramp, Abel Squires, who from this post could see very little more than the scaffolding-poles, but who had remained there,

nevertheless, since the moment, early that morning, when the workmen from Sheffield first made their appearance. Vernon was inside the church, keeping out of the way of every one but the foreman, to whom he was giving certain structural explanations ; while Mrs. Brander watched the proceedings from her pony carriage in the lane, and Fred Williams from the church roof. A small crowd of the country people, chiefly children and old pit-women, filled up the spaces, and made the isolation of the others less noticeable. Roaming about the churchyard, in a somewhat impatient manner, was also a gentleman whom Olivia did not immediately recognise as the doctor who had attended Ned Mitchell in his illness.

It was a sultry day, sunless and heavy. The smoke of the Sheffield chimneys hung over the hills in a thick black cloud, and appeared, Olivia thought, to be coming nearer and nearer. The air seemed to choke, instead of invigorate ; the leaves of the trees hung parched and still. The girl's excitement had all evaporated ; she waited there

without hope, without fear, in a dull state of expectancy, her clearest thought being a faint wish that she might be able to get quietly home again without having to speak to any one. Still she stood there, and watched the workmen slowly putting on their coats, the doctor as he flitted about the churchyard, without quite knowing whether she was asleep or awake, whether the figures moving silently about were flesh-and-blood creatures or images seen in a dream.

Suddenly a breath of air seemed to pass over every one, and the stirring of a more active life was felt. It was a voice at the gate of the churchyard which broke the hushed silence, and made every eye look up, while the women and children curtseyed, and the workmen touched their caps. The Vicar of Rishton, cheerful and smiling and bland, had worked the change by his appearance alone. A certain listlessness which had begun to creep over watchers and workers at the end of an eventless morning under a sullen sky, disappeared. There arose a

hum of talk; the workmen who had left off work hurried to their dinner-cans; the few who were still digging felt a spurt of fresh energy. It was felt that the portly presence of the much-respected vicar gave *éclat* to the proceedings, and new interest to a monotonous occupation. Only Ned Mitchell remained entirely unmoved. He gave the clergyman a glance and a nod, and then turned again to the two men at work in the crypt.

"Get on, you lazy devils!" he said, kicking a stone impatiently. "You might be millionaires, both of you, not to think it worth while to work harder for the chance of a ten-pound note."

"Why, we've turned the whole place out, master, and blest if there's a bloomin' thing to be found there except earth and stones," said one, in a rather grumbling tone.

"Hey, what?" asked Mr. Williams, in a surprised tone. "What's that they're looking for, eh, Mitchell? Something lost? Something buried, eh?"

"Both lost and buried," said Ned, briefly.
"What do you think, parson?"

And he turned quickly to the Reverend Meredith Brander, who had by this time, after a triumphal progress between two lines of admiring villagers, reached the group.

"Well, the churchyard is the place for the lost and buried, certainly," replied the vicar, whose bright complexion and serene smile were a charming thing to see after the anxious and gloomy faces the rest of the assembly had been wearing. "But, as we know, a time will come when we shall recover our lost ones," he added, with gentle solemnity.

"Some of us will recover 'em sooner than we bargain for, perhaps," said Ned, drily.

The vicar did not answer; indeed, he looked as if he did not understand. He nodded pleasantly, and looked round, smiling on such members of his family and of his congregation as were in sight. For a curious thing had happened since his coming; all those before-mentioned spectators who had been watching, as it were,

by stealth, now with one accord drew near to the entrance of the crypt, and cast at the vicar side-long glances of deep interest. Thus Olivia, Mrs. Brander, Vernon, the doctor, and Abel Squires, found themselves, as if by preconcerted arrangement, within a few feet of each other, and yet seemed to be unaware of this fact. The vicar also seemed not to notice this; but Ned Mitchell took in the curious situation with a keen glance, and read the varied expressions of curiosity, anxiety, and despondency, on the several faces, with cynical swiftness.

The men in the crypt did not leave off work with the rest; on the contrary, urged on by Ned Mitchell, whose tone grew sharper with every order he gave, they used pickaxe and spade with renewed energy.

"I don't quite understand the necessity for all this delving in the crypt," said old Mr. Williams, at last, rather pompously.

He was a man by habit too much occupied with himself to have troubled his head about the stories and scandals of the neighbourhood,

and no suggestion of any mystery connected with St. Cuthbert's had ever reached his ears.

" You'll see presently, perhaps," answered Ned, who betrayed his ever-increasing excitement only by the growing curtness of his tone. For he perceived, peering down into the gloom where the men were working, that the digging and delving had suddenly ceased, and that, in the remotest corner of the little crypt, both were kneeling down examining the lower part of the wall. Then one of the men struck a match, and a moment later his fellow-workman came to the opening.

" We've found something, sir ! " said he, in a low voice.

" Eh ? What ? " asked old Mr. Williams, who began to have an idea that he was being made a fool of.

There was a sort of rustle and flutter among the bystanders; for though all had not heard the workman's words, all knew that something had happened. Ned Mitchell, who was now so much excited that he dared not trust himself to

speak, beckoned to the doctor. The latter, who was on the alert, came up immediately. He was an active, brisk little man, sparing of words.

"I think we shall want you now, doctor, please," said Ned, in a voice which was getting hoarse and rasping. "What is it you have found, mate?" he went on, turning to the workman.

"It's a body, we think, your honour—the body of a woman."

The vicar, on entering the churchyard, had locked the gate, to keep out the swarm of unruly boys who always ooze out of the pores of the earth when anything of an unusual nature is going on; so that few people but those most interested in this discovery were present to hear the announcement of it. These all pressed forward until they stood—a silent, excited group—close to the crypt entrance. Mrs. Brander, although she remained perfectly quiet, laid her hand, either from sympathy or for support, on the arm of her brother-in-law. Vernon himself looked, if possible, more pale and haggard than

ever; but his face wore its habitual expression when in repose, a look of grave and somewhat cynical good-humour. The only noticeable thing about his demeanour was his careful avoidance of Olivia Denison; he would not even meet her eyes. The girl herself was white to the lips and cold from head to foot. Fred Williams, in a cheerful voice, offered her the support of his arm.

"These are nasty scenes for a lady to be present at," said he, with a little compunction in his voice. "Won't you let me take you away?"

She shook her head, and signed to him to leave her, which he did reluctantly and with some shame. In the meantime the gentlemen had descended into the crypt, with the exception of Vernon, who was detained by Mrs. Brander. By the light of a lantern and a torch a ghastly sight was soon disclosed to view.

In the lower part of the wall of the crypt, in the corner nearest the entrance, to which no daylight could ever pierce its way, was

unearthed, between the basis of two of the pillars supporting the roof, the almost fleshless skeleton of a woman, the damp rags of whose dress, still recognisable, hung round the bones in shrunken folds. The flaring and flickering of the lights on what had once been a beautiful face, on the remains of the finery which every other girl in the village had once envied, made an ever-changing, hideous picture, upon which the men all gazed with feelings of pity, horror, and disgust.

A savage exclamation burst from Ned's lips. Old Mr. Williams was struck dumb with horror; for to him the discovery was quite unforeseen. The doctor bent over the skeleton, and, taking a lantern into his own hand, looked carefully at the horrible thing, touched it, removed part of the ragged clothing, and muttered something the rest could not hear. The Vicar of Rishton, accustomed to death in many forms, maintained a demeanour of reverent gravity, tempered by amazement. As the doctor stooped, however, he interposed with some haste, and, coming close

beside him, tried gently but firmly to thrust him aside.

"There must be an inquiry into this, I suppose," he said; "though, for the sake of the unhappy man who committed this deed, and whom we know to have repented long ago, I trust it may be made as quietly as possible. In the meantime, the remains must be laid decently in some suitable place. I would suggest the church itself."

The doctor interrupted him brusquely. He with the rest, had been listening in dead silence to the clergyman's words.

"Where you like, vicar; but I must make an examination first. If I'm not mistaken, I've seen something just now which will be a positive means of identifying the murderer."

Still the vicar insisted, gently, but with becoming determination.

"I really think, in a matter touching the sanctity of the dead, that I, as vicar, ought to have a voice."

"But you're not the vicar of this church,"

said the doctor, standing his ground. "The Vicar of St. Cuthbert's is your brother Vernon ; and if, as you seem to say, he has had anything to do with this business——"

There was a stir among the hearers, and old Mr. Williams burst out, "What ! What ! Vernon Brander ! Bless me ! You don't mean to say——?"

The vicar was protesting ; Ned Mitchell was swearing and muttering ; Fred Williams, who had crept in during the last few minutes, was whistling softly to himself, to keep off the horrors.

Suddenly the doctor, who had again stooped over the skeleton, silenced them all in imperious tones.

"Stand back, gentlemen ! In two moments I can satisfy your curiosity as to who murdered this woman."

The vicar only attempted to resist this command ; but the doctor, with a skilful and most unceremonious thrust, forced him back into the rest of the group ; and the next moment the

reverend arms were pinioned by Ned Mitchell's strong hands.

"Keep back, can't you?" hissed Ned, roughly, into his ear; "murder will out, you know! And people might say such ugly things if they thought you wanted to hide the truth."

After this there was a sickening, death-like pause, while the doctor's hands moved rapidly about the horrible heap of human bones and tattered finery. Then he sprang up, and made quickly for the light. The rest followed, huddled together, panting, bewildered, like a flock of frightened sheep; for the doctor's face, old practitioner though he was, was livid and tremulous with a great horror. Standing in the open daylight, they found him looking at something he held half concealed in his hand. Mrs. Brander, Vernon, and Olivia Denison, stood a little way off, watching him, but not daring to come near. He closed his hand as the men gathered round him.

"Gentlemen," he began, gravely, in a very

low voice, "there are circumstances in this case so revolting that I think that no good can come of making them public. But you shall judge. I have found, inside the remains of that poor girl, a ring which, there can be no doubt, was the property of the murderer. In spite of the decayed state of the body, I can undertake to say that this ring was swallowed by the girl just before her death. Here," and he held up his closed hand, "is the ring. Shall I show it you?"

"No!" said the Vicar of Rishton, sharply.

They all turned to look at him.

"Why not?" asked the doctor, quietly.

Meredith Brander had recovered the composure which, indeed, he could scarcely be said for a moment to have lost.

"What good would it do?" he asked, gazing blandly in the doctor's face.

Doctor Harper returned his look with astonishment, which became almost admiration.

"Well," he answered, "it would show up the most remarkably perfect specimen of a

consummate humbug that I have ever had the honour of meeting."

A curious thing had happened before this short colloquy was ended. The rest of the group had gradually dispersed, and left the two men alone together. As he uttered the last words the doctor also turned abruptly away, so that the vicar was left by himself. He did not seem disconcerted, but walked, with a half-smile on his face, in the direction of the churchyard gate. His wife, whose handsome face was as pale as that of a corpse, and whose limbs tottered under her, moved, with faltering step, in the same direction. At the gate stood Abel Squires, who stood back to allow the vicar to pass out first; but Meredith Brander would not allow this. He turned to him with a kindly nod.

"Well, Abel," said he, "I'm afraid this is a sad business for somebody."

"I'm afeard so too, sir," replied Abel, with an immovable face.

"We must hush it up. I'm sure you would not like any harm to come to my brother."

"No fear o' that, sir," said Abel. "I could prevent that."

"Why, how so?"

"Ah wur wi' him all that evenin'. An' if he hadn't kept my tongue quiet all these years hissen, truth would ha' been aht long ago."

The vicar went through the gate without another word; but before he had taken many steps in the lane outside, he felt an arm thrust through his. It was his brother Vernon, who pressed his arm warmly two or three times before he spoke.

"Cheer up, old chap!" he whispered, huskily. "For Evelyn's sake and the children's we can get it kept quiet still."

Then, for the first time, Meredith threatened to break down. He wrung his brother's hand with a force which made Vernon turn white, and when he answered, it was with sobs in his voice.

"I'm a scoundrel, Vernie," he almost gasped. "But if you save me again, on my soul I'll be better to them than many an honest man."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE VICAR'S CONFESSION.

NED MITCHELL, although he had let Meredith Brander off easily at the moment of the discovery of the body, had no intention of letting his sister's murderer escape the just punishment of his crime. The discovery of the vicar's ring inside the poor girl's remains had not been altogether unexpected by Ned, and by the doctor, whom he had taken into his confidence. He had had the wit to connect the vicar's loss of his ring, which the girl must have stolen and secreted unnoticed by him in the course of their last fatal interview, with the strange threat Nellie Mitchell had uttered to Martha Lowndes. He had confided his suspicions to the doctor, who had thus been on the alert to prevent Meredith from touching the remains of the murdered girl before he himself had examined them.

After a few words of explanation to old Mr. Williams, and a little substantial advice to the two workmen who had dug out the skeleton, Ned marched off with Abel Squires in the direction of Rishton Vicarage. On the way they passed Vernon Brander, who wished to stop Ned; but the latter hurried on, and to all the entreaties he tried to utter turned a deaf ear.

"If you've been fool enough to hold your tongue for ten years, and bear the blame of somebody else's crime, that's nothing to do with me. You may talk till your tired, but my sister's murderer shall get what he deserves."

And he walked on stubbornly with the tramp.

When they reached the Vicarage, and asked to see the vicar, they were shown into the drawing-room, and left waiting there for some minutes. When the door opened it was Mrs. Brander, instead of her husband, who came in.

"What, has he run away already?" asked Ned, in a hard, jeering tone.

"No, my husband does not yet know you are here," she answered, in a very sad voice. "I

knew you would come, and so I told the servant to announce your arrival to me."

"What's the good of that?" asked Ned, roughly. "You've done no harm, and we've nothing to do with you, except that we're going to set you free from a rascal."

Abel Squires had withdrawn to the farthest window, and tried to hide himself behind the curtain. Rough fellow as he was, to hear a man speak in a bullying tone to that beautiful, dignified lady was too much for him.

Mrs. Brander had never in her life before looked so handsome as she looked now, standing erect before this coarse man, with a flush of deep humiliation in her cheeks, and passionate entreaty softening her proud eyes.

"But my children, my poor children; they have done less harm in the world than your sister did, and if you hurt my husband you sacrifice them. Think of that. You have children of your own. You don't dote on them," passionately, "any more than I do on mine; therefore you can enter into my feelings. Is it fair, is it just, that

they should suffer? I don't appeal for myself, for you don't like me. But just think of this: for ten years I have been a dutiful wife to this man, who was unfaithful to me even in my fresh youth, when I was beautiful, so they said, and loving and devoted. Listen. I knew of the murder on the night he committed it; for he came straight back with stained hands, and a face I never shall forget. Do you not think that was something to forgive? But I did it, and I implore you to do it too. I am not asking you an impossible thing, for I have done it myself. And think under what circumstances!"

But Ned remained as hard as nails.

"I suppose—no offence to you, madam—your motives were not entirely unselfish. And even if they were, that's no business of mine. If you chose to put up with him, that was your look-out. I came back here to punish my sister's murderer, and I'm not going to be made a fool of by a woman when the game's in my own hands."

Ned spoke the more harshly, that he was

really rather touched by her beauty and her high spirit. There was something in her frank, straightforward manner of pleading more to his taste than any amount of tearful, hysterical incoherence would have been. But Mrs. Brander had a most unexpected ally near at hand. Thumpety-thump came Abel Squires, with his wooden leg, out of his hiding-place. He did not look at the lady, but going straight up to Ned, jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of where she was standing.

"Hold hard, Mester Mitchell," said he, without moving a muscle of his dried-up face ; "Ah didn't bargain fur this when Ah coom here to-day. A woman's a woman. An' t' woman ye're so soft abaht's dead, but t' woman ye're so hard on's alive. Steady theer, Mester Mitchell, or Ah'll hev to swear Ah killed t' lass mysen."

The poor woman broke down at these words from the rough tramp; she turned away abruptly to hide the tears which sprang to her eyes. Ned, who was hard, brusque, and determined, but not inhuman, moved uneasily about the room.

"Women have no business to interfere in these matters," said he, angrily.

Mrs. Brander saw that there was hope. She moved nearer to him, clasping her hands, not in supplication, but because they would twitch and tremble, and so betray the anguish she was suffering. She tried to speak, but couldn't. But with one piteous look out of her proud eyes, she turned away again.

"Well," said Ned, in very ill-tempered tones, "we're wasting our time here, Abel, and Mrs. Brander's. So, please, madam, let us see your husband, and have done with him."

But Mrs. Brander hastened to intercept him on his way to the door.

"You will not be too hard," she pleaded, in a breaking voice. "You are not vindictive, I am sure."

"I beg your pardon, madam, that's just what I am," snarled Ned. "And if I'm fool enough not to insist on the hanging he deserves, I'm not going to let him off scot free, I can tell you."

"Of course not, of course not," said she, in a

tone of great relief. "He has done wrong—great wrong; and he must suffer for it—we must suffer for it. Only don't expose him. Anything but that."

"Yes, anything but what he deserves, of course. Let us pass, madam, please. He is in the library, I suppose?"

"I suppose so," she faltered.

Ned turned round abruptly.

"You suppose so! Well, if he's given us the slip, and left you to bear the brunt of it all, it'll be the worse for him."

Mrs. Brander drew herself up in the old, proud way, and spoke with her accustomed cold haughtiness in addressing a person she disliked.

"You need not be afraid, Mr. Mitchell. I can stand by a criminal husband; I would not by a cowardly one."

"Do you call it courageous, then, to kill a woman, and let another man bear the blame for ten years?" asked Ned.

Mrs. Brander did not answer. She led the way across the hall to the study, and knocked.

"Come in," called out the vicar in his usual voice.

She opened the door, and signed to the two men to follow her in. Abel would have slunk away, but Ned Mitchell kept a tight hold on his arm. Both, however, kept in the background, near the door, while the lady went up to her husband, and laid her hand upon his shoulder. He leant back in his comfortable chair, pen still in hand. He had been busy writing, and the table was covered with large sheets of MS. He faced the two intruders with an air of mild annoyance, which would have made an onlooker think that he was the injured person. Ned, with astonishment, which he would not admit by word or look, examined the bland, fair face, with its healthy complexion, frank blue eyes, broad white forehead, and saw on it no trace of shame, guilt, or even of anxiety. It was his wife's face which bore all these signs. As she stood, upright and daring, by her husband's side, handsome, majestic, and brave, Ned Mitchell felt that to deal with Meredith as he deserved

while she remained there was impossible. He half turned, as if anxious to put off the interview. The vicar changed his position, wheeling his chair round, so that he could face the two men.

"Well," he said, "you wish to speak to me, do you not?"

His tone was mildly peremptory.

"Yes, we do. But what we have to say we wish to say to you alone."

"Go, my dear," said Meredith, turning kindly to his wife.

She hesitated, and he pushed her gently away from him. Then she stooped, kissed his forehead, and with an imploring, yet still dignified, look into Ned's reluctant eyes as she passed him, she slowly left the room.

"Now," said Mitchell, in a louder, more assured tone, as if much relieved, "we've got an account to settle with you."

"Well, sit down, and let us have it out."

Meredith was not in the least discomposed.

He took up the pen he had been using, wiped it carefully, and then crossing his legs and clasping his hands over them, assumed the attitude in which he was accustomed to give private advice or consolation to members of his flock.

"I'm afraid we are interrupting you," said Ned, ironically; so he prepared to sit down, which Abel shyly refused to do.

"Not at all. I was writing my sermon for next Sunday; but as I suppose it lies with you whether I shall be allowed to preach it, I can't complain of your visit as an interruption."

"You take this business pretty coolly," cried Ned, losing patience.

Meredith looked at him with a sudden flash of fire in his blue eyes, a spark of the same fierce spirit which he had revealed to Ned on the night when he conquered and controlled the bloodhounds at the cottage.

"Do you suppose that I have kept my head for ten years to lose it now?"

Ned was taken aback. There was a pause before he said, in almost a respectful voice—

"You admit everything, then?"

"I admit everything you know, of course. This man here could prove whatever I might deny. Besides, everybody knows that ring is mine; I did not know until to-day how I lost it, as you may guess; else I should have been prepared with some story."

Ned Mitchell, who had brought the ring with him and had just produced it, thinking to confound the vicar, slipped it back into his pocket with uncertain fingers.

"And you are prepared for the consequences?"

"As much prepared as a man ever is for a very unpleasant contingency."

"Even if the contingency is—what the law prescribes for discovered murderers?"

"You mean hanging?"

Ned Mitchell nodded, and the vicar paused.

"I won't say that I am prepared for that; I can't say that I ever contemplated such a possibility seriously. It would be a terrible precedent to hang a vicar. I should probably get off as

'of unsound mind,' and be confined 'during her Majesty's pleasure.' "

"And if they shouldn't be so lenient?"

"Then I should go through with it as well as a man may."

"And if I let you off the full penalty," said Ned, wondering if it were possible to disturb this stolid serenity, "what would you feel towards me?"

"Nothing," answered the vicar, promptly. "You would do it, not for my sake, but out of admiration for my wife, pity for my children, and because my arrest would involve my brother's, as an accessory after the fact. He saw me immediately after the—the deed; the crime, in fact; and he concurred, if he did not assist, in the concealment of the body, as Abel here probably knows."

"Ay," said Abel Squires, who was standing, awkwardly, as near the door as possible. "Mester Vernon and me had walked nigh all t' way from Sheffield together, and we heerd cries o' 'Murder!' An' Mester Vernon he left

me, an' he jumped o'er t' wall into t' church-yard, an' when he coom back he looked skeered loike, and his reight hond wur stained red, as if he'd held another hond that wur redder still. An' somehow Ah guessed whose hond it wur as he'd been holdin'."

Abel, after delivering this speech in a mumbling, shame-faced manner, ended abruptly, and looked at the door, as if he felt that his unpleasant mission was over. The vicar listened with interest, and nodded assent to the latter portion of the tramp's words. Ned Mitchell continued to gaze at Meredith like a bear baulked of his prey.

"I don't believe you've even felt much remorse all these years," he said, savagely.

The vicar faced him frankly.

"To tell the truth, I haven't," he said. "That's not in my temperament. I suppose this sounds especially remarkable because I am a clergyman. But my profession was forced upon me; I had to put an unnatural curb upon myself, and succeeded in attaining a pitch of

outward decorum such as none of my family had ever reached before. But the strain was too great, for I am not by temperament virtuous; none of my family are. Vernon has an accident, and not his nature, to thank for his superiority. That is all I have to say."

The vicar leaned back in his chair, as if weary of the discussion.

"Then you don't seem to have any conscience," said Ned, regarding him in bewilderment.

"Not much, I suppose," answered the vicar; "though, indeed, lately I have had troubled nights, and shown the family tendency towards somnambulism; so my wife tells me. And in rather an unfortunate way," he added, with a half-smile.

As the vicar finished speaking Ned came forward with his ponderous tread, laid his hand heavily on the writing-table, and looked down at the clergyman's bland face with the air of a strong man who has definitely made up his mind.

"Now then, parson, I'll tell you what you'll have to do. You take that pen that you've just been writing your precious sermon with, and you write a detailed confession of your intrigue with my sister, your visits to her at night, your correspondence with her, the way in which you murdered her, and the way in which you disposed of her body. Then sign your name and put the date in full, and me and Abel here will oblige you by putting our signatures as witnesses."

"And if I do this, what follows?" asked the vicar, taking up the pen and examining the nib.

"Then you get my permission to leave this country for any other you choose with your wife and children. And as long as you keep away, this paper will never go out of my possession."

"And if I don't do this?"

"What's the good of going into that?"

The eyes of the two men met, and they understood each other. Without wasting more words, Meredith turned to the table, invited

Ned with a gesture to sit down, and proceeded to draw up the prescribed confession. This he did fully and frankly, adding at the end certain graceful expressions of contrition, which Ned, reading the document over carefully, took for what they were worth. The main body of the composition satisfied him, however; and after appending his own signature to the confession as a witness, and insisting on Abel's adding his, he sealed up the paper with great solemnity. Then, intimating to Meredith Brander that the sooner he carried out the remaining part of the compact and left the country, the better it would be for him, he left the room with the curtest of farewells, and hastened out of the house, to avoid what he called "another scene with the woman."

Once outside he looked back at the Vicarage with great interest.

"If one had to be a rascal," said he, with some irrepressible admiration, "that's the sort of rascal one would choose to be."

Then Abel Squires left him and hobbled off,

and Ned was left to his pipe and his reflections, both which he chose to enjoy, not at his garden gate as usual, but at the bottom of the hill, outside Rishton Hall farmyard.

Before he had been there more than a few minutes the event he was prepared for took place. Olivia Denison, pale, excited, tearful, yet radiant, came to the gate, looking out anxiously. Seeing Ned, she ran out to him with a cry.

"Oh, Mr. Mitchell," she said, almost in a whisper, "I must ask you to forgive me. I had such unjust thoughts of you. I thought, until the night before last, that you meant to ruin Vernon, in spite of your promise."

"Um," said Ned; "you hadn't much faith in your lover, now, had you, to think him capable of——?"

"Hush! never mind that. You see, I must have felt at the bottom of my heart that he was really good; for I loved him all the time just the same."

"That doesn't follow at all. Women always

go by contraries. The more of a villain a man is, the more a woman likes him. Look at the vicar here, and the way his wife sticks to him. And look at me, as honest a fellow as ever lived, and what do you think my wife cares for me or my affections? Not a single straw, I tell you."

" Well," said Olivia, smiling, "considering the small amount of affection you seem to waste on her, I think it's just as well for her happiness that she is not dying for love of you."

" Ah, you're full of these new-fangled notions about the equality of the sexes. Now, I say, men and women are different. The man does all the hard work, and even if he goes a little bit off the straight sometimes, it's no more than he has a right to, provided he fills the mouths at home. The woman has nothing to do but look after the home and children, and mend their clothes and her husband's. And if she can't find time besides to be devoted to her husband, and to think him the finest fellow on earth in return for what he does for her, why, she aint worth her salt: that's all. Now that's

my marriage code, Miss Denison, though I can see by your face it isn't yours."

"I really haven't considered the subject much," replied Olivia, demurely, but with a bright blush.

"You might do worse, though, than consider it, now that things have shaped themselves a bit," said Ned, in a dry tone. "Our dear friend the vicar here is going to leave this country, in consideration of a certain little matter being hushed up."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" interrupted Olivia, with a deep-drawn breath of relief; "that is good of you, Mr. Mitchell. For it would have been dreadful—dreadful!"

Ned was looking away over the corn-fields, where his sharp eyes detected a figure he recognised wandering about in an aimless manner.

"I think you'd better take a walk out into the meadows there," he said, after a minute's pause, turning again to the young lady, with a kindly look on his hard face. "It will do you

good after all the excitement and botherment of this morning."

Olivia blushed again.

"Thank you," she said, with a proud turn of her head. "I don't care to go out again this afternoon ; the air is much too oppressive."

"Oh, all right," said Ned, with a dry nod ; "then I mustn't keep you out here talking in the 'oppressive' air, I suppose. Good-day, Miss Denison."

"Good-bye," she said, gently, holding out her hand, which he shook with a firm pressure.

Then he walked up the hill, talking to himself.

"These Old Country lasses are fine creatures," he meditated. "There's Mrs. B., whom I didn't care for, and Miss D., whom I did, and I'm blest if they haven't both got too good a spirit to be married at all. Yet one wouldn't care to see them old maids, either—nor yet men —nor yet angels. These high-spirited ladies, who can think and act for themselves, don't seem to fit in somehow. One would feel they

were kind of too good for one. Give me a nice, comfortable lass, whom you needn't study any more than a potato ; you know what to be at with one of them. By-the-bye, now I suppose I must take ship and see how my own 'potato' is getting on."

Nevertheless, from the top of the hill he looked down rather sentimentally in the direction of the old farm. As he did so he caught sight of a girl's tall figure in the meadows. He laughed out maliciously—

"She's gone to meet him. I thought she would. I'd have let off half a dozen scoundrels to give that lass her heart's desire, that I would."

And he watched her till a rising in the meadow ground and a thick flowering hedge hid her from sight.

After a few minutes' arguing with herself, Olivia, who guessed the reason of Ned Mitchell's suggestion of a walk in the fields, decided that she ought without delay to let Vernon Brander know the result of the interview between his

brother and the colonist. So she darted through the gate and across the road with the agility of a deer, in spite of the “oppressive air.” So excited was she, so full of joy at the turn affairs had taken, that she almost ran along the footpath, beside the sweet-scented hedges, with an occasional little leap or bound of most undignified happiness. Thus it happened that when she came unexpectedly face to face with Vernon Brander, on rounding a thicket of bushes and small trees, she was springing into the air with her face radiant with delight, and a soft song—something about “birds” and “love”—upon her lips. Vernon, on his side, looked, if anything, even more haggard and woe-begone than usual. Both stopped short, and Olivia, who had become on the instant very subdued, drew a deep breath of confusion.

“Mr. Brander,” she began, in a cool, almost cold, voice, “I—I—er—I have just met Ned Mitchell, and I think you ought to know what he says.”

“For Heaven’s sake, yes: tell me!”

"He is going to hush it all up, on condition that your brother leaves the country altogether."

Vernon drew a deep breath of relief, and almost reeled against the fence which protected the thicket on one side.

"Thank God!" he whispered.

And he put one hand to his face, as if to shut out the fearful picture his imagination and his fears had been conjuring up. Olivia waited impatiently as long as she could. At last, when she could bear this neglect no longer, she said, rather tartly—

"Mrs. Brander will have to go too."

"Of course—of course, she will go with her husband."

Vernon was still in a dazed state, not yet understanding what a great change in his prospects of happiness the day's events had made.

"I think it was very silly of you to keep silence all these years just to please her. It was she who made you, I suppose—came to you, and wheedled you. Men are so easily coaxed,"

continued Olivia, disdainfully, with her head in the air.

She had never been curt and dictatorial, like this, with him before. Poor Vernon, quite unskilled in the wiles of her sex, was abashed and bewildered.

"Yes," he admitted, humbly; "she came to me and begged me not to say anything if people suspected me. And, you see, I had been so fond of her, and she was in delicate health, and I had no wife or children to be hurt by what people might think of me; and so I promised."

"And she made you promise not to marry, didn't she?"

"Well, yes. Poor thing, she had to do the best she could for her husband and children; and, of course, she thought if I married I should let out the secret to my wife, and my wife would insist on having things explained."

"I should think so," said Olivia.

"And now," said Vernon, who was getting more and more downcast under the influence of

this surprising change in her, “ I’m too old and too sour to marry, and I think I shall go away with them, and have my little Kitty to console me.”

“ Yes,” said Olivia, quietly, her voice losing suddenly all its buoyancy as well as all its momentary sharpness; “ I think that will be a very good plan. You will let us know when you intend to start, won’t you, for my father and mother owe you an apology first? Now, I must be getting back. Good-evening.”

Dull Vernon began at last to have a glimmer of insight into the girl’s secret feelings. He shook hands with her, let her walk as far as the very end of the field, noticing with admiration, which had suddenly, after the strain of the morning, again grown passionate, her springing walk and graceful, erect carriage. Then he ran after her on the wings of the wind, and placed himself, panting, with his back to the gate she was approaching.

“ I’m sorry to trouble you,” he said, as he looked with sparkling eyes into her face, “ but you

seem to forget I've lent you fifty pounds. I shall want it back to pay my passage."

Olivia caught her breath, and her face, which was wet with tears, grew happy again.

"I'd forgotten all about it," said she, in a tremulous voice, half saucily, half demurely. "But, anyhow, you can't have it."

"And why not, Miss Denison?" asked Vernon, coming a step nearer.

"Because I—I don't want you to go away," answered she.

And she fell into his arms without further invitation, and gave him a tender woman's kiss, an earnest of the love and sympathy he had hungered for these ten years!

* * * * *

The true story of the murder at St. Cuthbert's never became commonly known. At the inquest which was opened on the remains found in the crypt, nobody who had anything to tell told anything worth hearing. But, then, nobody was very anxious to discover the truth, for rumours too dreadful for investigation began to

fly about; and nobody was astonished when, the health of his children requiring a change to a warmer climate, the Reverend Meredith Brander got, by the interest of his uncle, Lord Stannington, an appointment at Malta, for which place he started, with his wife and family, without delay.

The vacant living of Rishton was given by Lord Stannington to his other nephew, Vernon ; and Olivia, though lamentably unlike the popular ideal of a clergyman's wife, became as much idolised by the poor of the parish as her husband was already.

John Oldshaw got Rishton Hall Farm ; for Mr. Denison's friends persuaded him to give up farming while he had still something left to lose. But the farmer did not long survive his coveted happiness. Dying in a fit of apoplexy, he left his broad acres in the care of his son Mat, who, instead of setting up as a country gentleman, as his sisters declared he would do if he had any spirit, married little Lucy, made her a good husband, and remained for ever, in common

with his wife, the idolatrous slave of her late mistress.

"Theer bean't more'n one woman in t' world," he would say, "too good for Parson Brander; boot theer be one, and that's his wife."

But though "Parson Brander" himself agreed with this, he was mistaken; for, like every other good woman, she was the better, and the little world around her was the better, for the fact that she was the noble and true mate of a noble and true man.

THE END.

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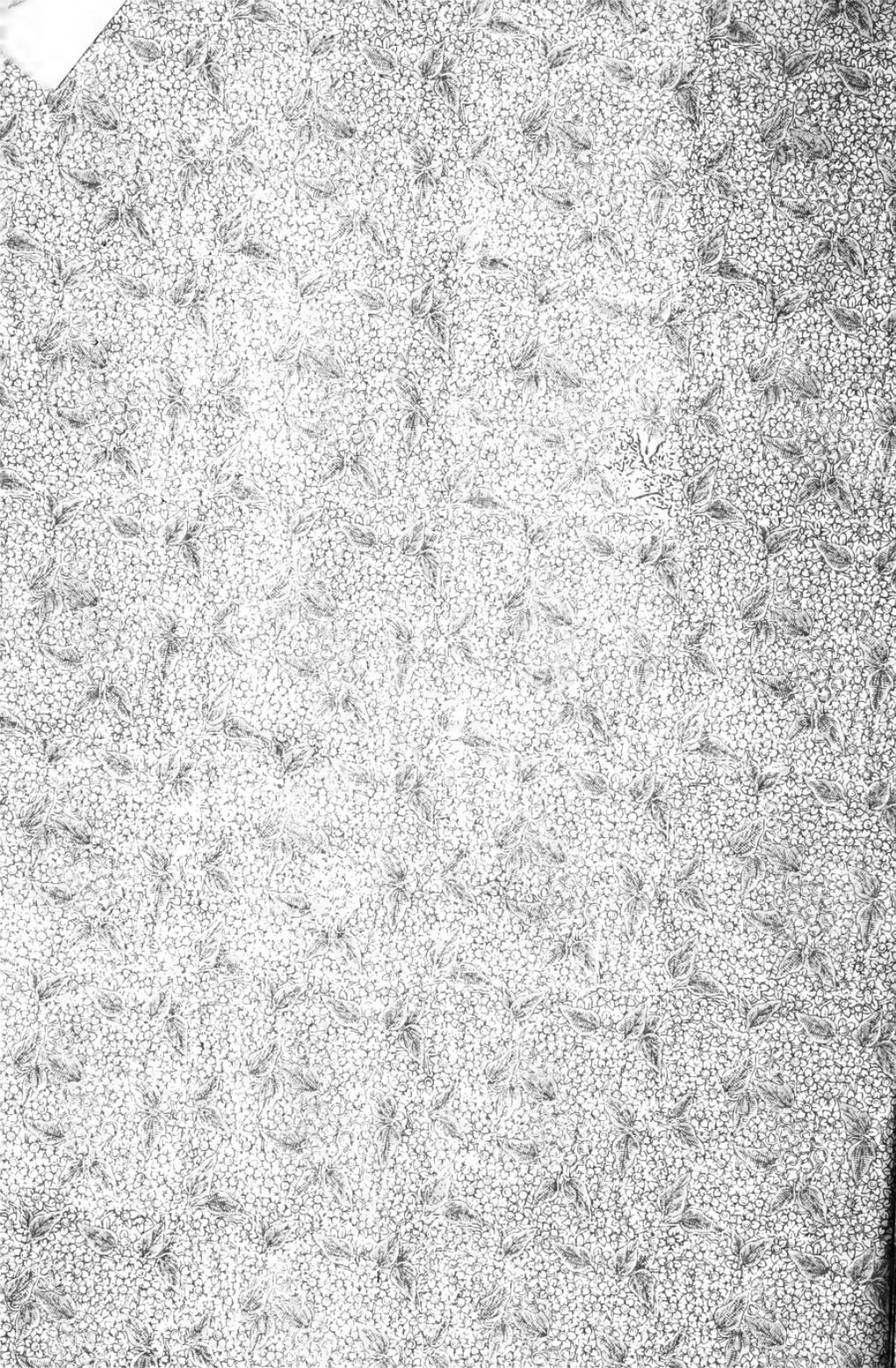
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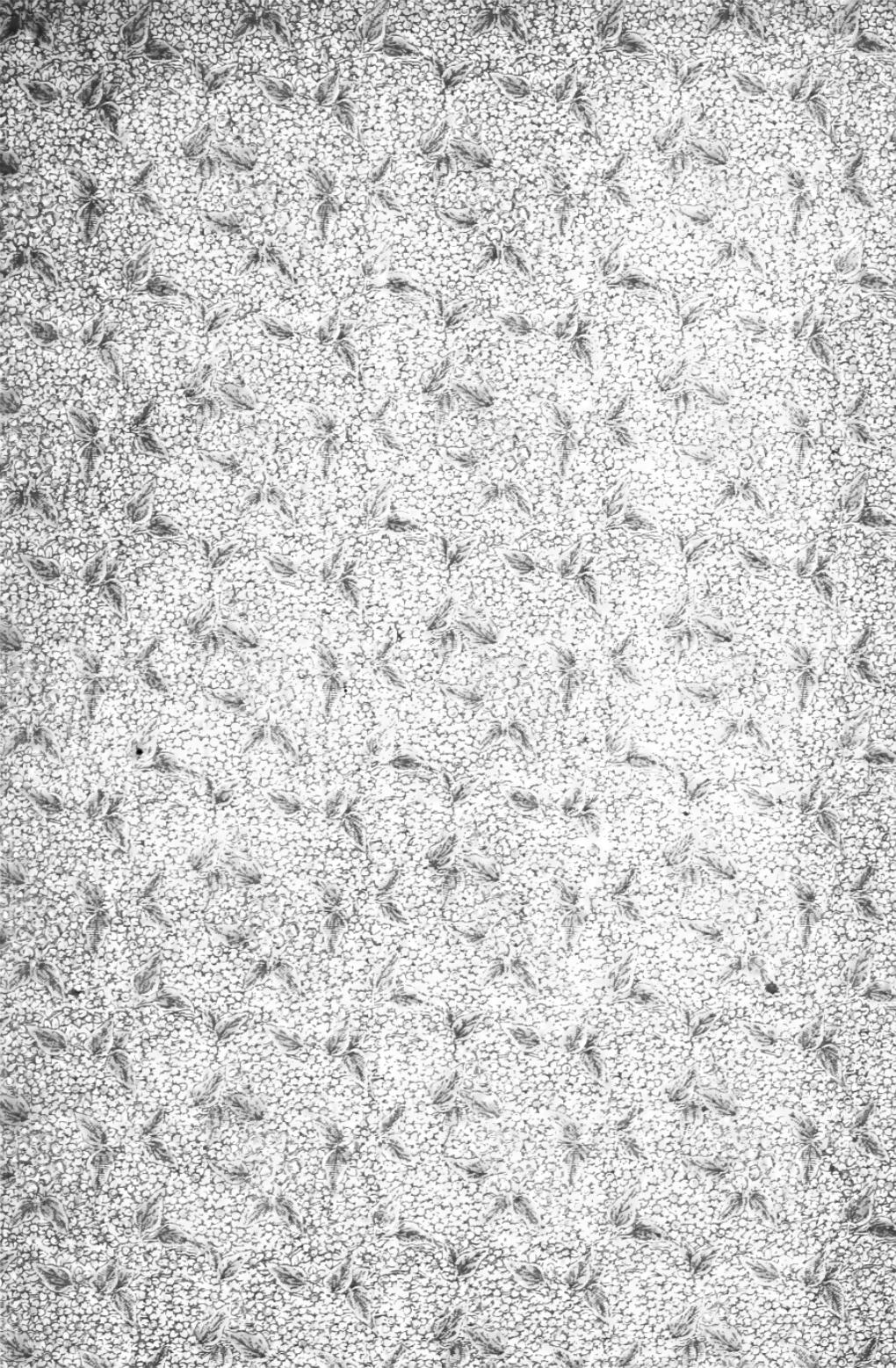
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